

“BORDERLAND”: WHAT SHAPED THE EU, CHINA, AND  
USA’S RESPONSES TO THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF  
UKRAINE, AND WHAT MAKES UKRAINE UNIQUE

by  
SEAN SCOTT

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Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Thesis Advisor

One of the etymological roots of Ukraine, *Ukraina*, is often interpreted as “borderland,” a diverse place at the center of competing understandings of identity and nationhood. This conception of Ukraine as a borderland works well as a metaphor for its position within international relations; a space where strong competing interests and reactions are clashing beyond the battlefield. However, despite this utility in one field, it neglects Ukraine’s history and relationship with Russia and the facets of Ukraine that both make it unique and the subject of Russia’s invasion. This thesis will cover both of these two important topics; First, it will cover what sets Ukraine apart from the rest of Eastern Europe in terms of both Russia’s history with the country and Eastern European foreign policy generally. Second, this thesis will cover how the three central theories of international relations, realism, liberalism, and constructivism, explain the varied reactions to the conflict, particularly the EU, China, and United States. Finally, I outline my perspective on which theory “best” applies broadly across the international reaction to the conflict, and what that means for the future.

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Finally, I want to thank my family: my mom, Linda; and my father, Felton. Their unwavering faith and support in me helped me write the best thesis I could and become the best person I could be. I hope I continue to make you proud.

On a less personal level, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the brave people of Ukraine. While this thesis focuses on international relations theory, this conflict is very real for the 44 million Ukrainians whose existence is currently under threat by the Russian invasion. I hope that we as a global community can come together and end this conflict that ensures the territorial sovereignty and dignity of the Ukrainian people now and for the future.

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## Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022 was the culmination of just under a years' worth of direct escalation, with Russian officials accusing Ukraine of inciting tensions, repressing Russians within Ukraine, and stating the necessity of Russia to "de-Nazify" Ukraine. Three days before the "special military operations" commenced, Russian head of state Vladimir Putin said in a speech that "Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood"<sup>1</sup>, reflecting a long-held sentiment within Russia that Ukraine and its people are not on equal footing with the Russians in terms of cultural and political legitimacy. Following the Russian invasion, countries decided to get involved indirectly with the conflict, each with their own reasoning and motivations for doing so. One means of examining the reasoning of these countries is through the lens of international relations (IR) theory, in which there are three primary schools of thought: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Before diving into the causes of this conflict and the various international reactions to the Ukrainian conflict, it is worth defining each of these theoretical frameworks.

To begin with perhaps the most dominant framework within IR thought, realism emphasizes the role of power, self-interest, and security in shaping the behavior of states in the international system. The primary assumption of realism is that the international system is characterized by "anarchy", the concept that there is no central institution or authority that can enforce rules and regulations on states. As a result of this anarchy, states must be self-reliant, using their power and resources to provide for their own survival and national interests. As such, states are the primary actors in international relations and pursue their national interests through

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<sup>1</sup> Putin, V. (2022, February 21). *Russian President Putin Statement on Ukraine*. C-Span. [www.c-span.org/video/?518097-2/russian-president-putin-recognizes-independence-donetsk-luhansk-ukraines-donbas-region](http://www.c-span.org/video/?518097-2/russian-president-putin-recognizes-independence-donetsk-luhansk-ukraines-donbas-region)

what realists call a “balance of power strategy”, which means that states seek to maximize their power relative to other states, as power is seen as the means to ensure survival and protect their national interests. This pursuit of their national interests is done, according to realists, in a “rational” manner. Another core assumption of realism is this idea of states being “rational actors”; states are not motivated by moral or ethical considerations, but rather by a cold calculation of cost and benefit.

Within realism itself, there are two main sub-schools of thought: classical realism and neorealism. Classical realism is focused on the role of human nature in shaping international relations. They argue that the quest for power and security is driven by the innate human desire for self-preservation and survival. Classical realists also emphasize the role of domestic politics and the individual character of leaders in shaping foreign policy. Conversely, neorealism focuses on the structure of the international system itself. Neorealists argue that the behavior of states is shaped by the distribution of power in the international system. They believe that the international system is characterized by a balance of power, where states seek to maintain the status quo and prevent any one state from dominating the system. Neorealists also emphasize the importance of the international system in shaping the behavior of states, rather than the individual actions of leaders. Neorealism is also further divided into “offensive” and “defensive” realism. These subsections are centered on the differing interpretations of how states react to imbalances of power. In an offensive realist world, states make worst-case assumptions about their rivals’ intentions and their survival requires states to think offensively and behave aggressively. Defensive realism holds the opposite position, that the aggressive nature of states promoted by offensive realists does not mesh with states not wanting to upset the balance of power and maintain the status quo.

Liberalism emphasizes the importance of institutions in international relations. One of its core tenets is that states are not the only actors in the global system; rather, individuals, non-state actors, and international organizations all play important roles. In particular, liberalism has a strong focus on the importance of democracy. This is due, in part, to the liberal assertion that states can cooperate and that cooperation is beneficial for all parties involved. A central argument of liberalism is the democratic peace theory, the idea that democratic states are more likely to cooperate with each other, and they tend to be more peaceful than non-democratic states. As Steven Hook puts it, while “democracies are not so peacefully inclined toward authoritarian regimes.... ‘the idea that democracies almost never go to war with each other is now commonplace.’”<sup>2</sup> There is also an economic angle in liberal theory. Liberalism advocates for free markets and free trade, arguing not only that free trade promotes economic growth and benefits all parties involved, but that there is also a pacific effect of economic relations between nations.

There are also different types of liberalism that change the level of analysis of the theory. Liberalism is unique relative to the other international theories in that it has both a systemic and domestic levels of analysis, each of which provide different vantage points on the influences of a particular state’s foreign policy. Systemic liberalism focuses on the institutional aspect of liberalism, such as the international organizations that mold a state’s behavior. Domestic liberalism opens the proverbial “black box” of a state and looks at the interest groups and domestic institutions that influence a state’s foreign policy. Interestingly enough, there is a hint of realism in domestic liberal theory, as domestic liberalism holds the assumption that these interest groups or domestic institutions act rationally. However, it is worth noting that liberalism

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<sup>2</sup> Hook, S. W. (Ed.). (2015). *Democratic peace in theory and practice*. The Kent State University Press, p. 2

does not hold the same rationality “standard” to the state itself. Commercial and democratic liberalism are also types of liberalism worth mentioning. Like the above types, they are not opposing arguments but rather different foci within the theory. Commercial liberalism focuses on the economic elements of liberal theory, whereas democratic liberalism focuses on democratic peace theory and the other effects of democracy within liberalism.

Lastly, constructivism emphasizes the role of social constructions and norms in shaping international politics. At its core, it is concerned with the ways in which ideas, beliefs, and values influence the behavior of states, individuals, and other actors in the international system. This makes it almost separate from the other major theories in international relations which focus on material factors or have some sort of material component. According to constructivists, norms and social constructions can be as powerful as material factors in determining the behavior of states and other actors.

At the heart of constructivism is the idea that the international system is not a fixed or predetermined set of relationships, but rather is constantly being constructed and reconstructed by the actions of the states or the individuals making up said state. Essentially, the central argument is that international politics are not natural or defined by a singular factor, such as anarchy, but rather are dynamic and the evolution of continued interactions between states and other actors over time. The ideas and norms that define the constructivist position, constructivists argue, influence the behavior of states in a number of ways. For example, norms of sovereignty and non-intervention can discourage states from interfering in the affairs of other states, or the “nuclear taboo”<sup>3</sup> discourages states from using nuclear weapons. In addition to this, constructivists also argue that the behavior of states can be influenced by the identities and

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<sup>3</sup> Tannenwald, N. (2007). *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*. (n.p.): Cambridge University Press.



interests that they construct for themselves. For example, a state that sees itself as a leader in the international system may behave more assertively and seek to shape the behavior of other states, while a state that sees itself as a victim may be more likely to seek out alliances and support from other states.

### **Why Ukraine?**

The first question one must ask before diving into the reactions to the current Russo-Ukrainian conflict is why there is a conflict in Ukraine in the first place. This question is best separated into two separate foci. First, what separates Ukraine from the rest of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Sphere from Russia's perspective? Second, what were Russia's interests in beginning the conflict? Beginning with what makes Ukraine "special" for Russia, one must look at their historical relationship. From an ethnic and nationalism standpoint, Ukraine has long been subject to the changing interpretations of the Russian state of what "Russia" means and who is included. "Modern Russian nationalism, which was constructed after the Crimean War, the Polish rebellion of 1863, and the apparition of the public sphere by journalists....combined to form the concept of a Russian ethnic empire with the political concept of the Russian Empire aimed at the new project of an ethnically homogeneous Russian nation-state."<sup>4</sup> Creating this ethnically homogeneous Russian nation-state meant assimilating the various other ethnicities under the Russian Empire to the Russian language and culture. One of the primary targets of this assimilation were the Ukrainians, or "Little Russians," a term born out of 17th century Tsarist expansionist policy. While Ukrainian elites had been assimilating themselves to the Russian language and culture as far back as the 18th century, only after the aforementioned Polish

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<sup>4</sup> Kappeler, A. (2003). "Great Russians" and "Little Russians": Russian-Ukrainian Relations and Perceptions in Historical Perspective. *The Donald W. Treadgold Papers in Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies*, 39. [digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/35359/Treadgold\\_No39\\_2003.pdf?sequence=1](http://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/35359/Treadgold_No39_2003.pdf?sequence=1), p.15

rebellion of 1863 “did Russification of Ukrainians become an explicit goal of Tsarist policy.”<sup>5</sup> However, this policy was not successful.

This notion of a superior status being placed on Russian culture relative to the other cultures within the empire did not end with the Tsarist regime. During the Soviet era, particularly under Stalin, the supranational idea of “Russia” was replaced with the supranational idea of “Soviet.” This did not change, however, the continuing idea of Russian nationalism, and instead rebranded it. “Russians once again became ‘the leading people’ of the state, the older brothers in the Soviet family of peoples. Their language, culture, and history, got a superior status, and Russification again was furthered by the state.”<sup>6</sup> The conflict between the nationalisms of Russia and Ukraine are born out of this superiority complex and imperial history. The concept of Russian nationalism has always been linked with an imperial and nation-state mindset, a value that inherently clashes with Ukrainian notions of sovereignty “given the persistence of the belief among many Russians that they and the Ukrainians shared common historical origins and in effect belonged to one pan-Russian nationality.”<sup>7</sup> In a sense, Russia views Ukraine as a part of itself, and any deviation from the Russian sphere is both an affront to its regional influence but also its national history and mythology.

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the first significant “retaliation” for Ukraine drifting towards the European Union and the West. However, the annexation was not exactly “out of the blue.” While the Kremlin had not exerted any political pressure on Ukraine when the Association Agreement with the EU started to be drafted in 2007, in 2012 when then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich began to push Ukrainian parliament to pass reforms to

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16

<sup>7</sup> Tolz, V. (2002). Rethinking Russian–Ukrainian relations: a new trend in nation-building in post-communist Russia? *Nations and Nationalism*, 8(2), 235–253. doi.org/10.1111/1469-8219.00048, p. 237

conform the Ukrainian Government to EU standards, Russia changed its customs regulations with Ukraine such that it eventually stop all imports from Ukraine, cutting Ukrainian exports by \$1.4 billion.<sup>8</sup> One possible explanation from this shift in policy from Moscow comes from Pavlo Klimkin, who was a part of the Ukrainian delegation who worked on the Association Agreement. “The Russians simply did not believe [the Association Agreement with the EU] could come true. They didn’t believe in our ability to negotiate a good agreement and didn’t believe in our commitment to implement a good agreement.”<sup>9</sup> While this explanation implies a certain level of overconfidence on Russia’s part, the response itself makes sense within the context of Russia’s strategic goals in the region. From Russia’s perspective, Ukraine signing the Association Agreement with the European Union would lead to greater economic integration with the EU and represent a drift away from Russia’s sphere of influence. Thus, the imposition of economic sanctions were seen as a way to pressure Ukraine to change its course and maintain closer ties with Russia. These sanctions had the intended effect of dissuading Ukraine from signing the Association Agreement, but had an unintended outcome in the birth of the Euromaidan protests which resulted in a further political separation between Kyiv and Moscow.

As Aleksander Kwaśniewski writes “just like Yanukovich’s decision to withdraw from signing the association agreement with the EU ignited the mass protest that released the accumulated frustration of Ukraine society, so the Kremlin’s response to Ukraine’s ‘Revolution of Dignity’ released Russia’s accumulated energy of dissatisfaction with the existing rules of

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<sup>8</sup> Interfax Ukraine. (2013, December 18). *Eased Russian customs rules to save Ukraine \$1.5 bln in 2014, says minister*. [en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/182691.html](http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/182691.html)

<sup>9</sup> Kyiv Post. (2015, January 19). *Klimkin: Russia trying to force renegotiation of Minsk deals*. [archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/war-against-ukraine/klimkin-russia-trying-to-force-renegotiation-of-minsk-deals-377709.html](http://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/war-against-ukraine/klimkin-russia-trying-to-force-renegotiation-of-minsk-deals-377709.html)

international order.”<sup>10</sup> Kwaśniewski continues to discuss the three main Russian arguments “justifying” their actions regarding Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas which since has led to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine today. These three categories of arguments are, first, “Kyiv was captured by a “fascist junta” and everything that happened later... was, at its core, a popular reaction.”<sup>11</sup> This argument is rooted in the process in which former Ukrainian President Yanukovich was removed from power due to the Revolution of Dignity, which was a movement that was essentially the continuation of the Euromaidan protests. While Yanukovich favored a closer relationship with the European Union, he was more pro-Russian, being the head of Ukraine’s pro-Russian party “Party of Regions.” Following particularly bloody clashes with protesters in February 2014 in which Yanukovich used the Ukrainian police force, the Berkut, in an attempt to crush the protests. As he said on February 14th in the midst of the protests, "I want to say that I was incited and I'm incited to use various methods and ways to settle the situation.”<sup>12</sup>

The following week, Yanukovich fled the country after making an agreement with the opposition party in the Ukrainian parliament that called for early elections and the formation of a new unity party. The next day, Yanukovich was unanimously voted out of office, replacing the pro-Russian government with a pro-Western coalition. This change in “stance” of the Ukrainian government is where the “fascist junta” argument lies. From Russia, Yanukovich said in a statement that “Disguised behind a veneer of an allegedly legitimate government, there is a gang of ultranationalists and fascists now acting in Ukraine involving people who are now aspiring to

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<sup>10</sup> Kwaśniewski, A. (2015). Ukrainian-Russian Relations: Lessons for Contemporary International Politics. *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, 2, 22–33. [www.jstor.org/stable/48573451](http://www.jstor.org/stable/48573451), p. 26

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28

<sup>12</sup> Interfax Ukraine. (2014, February 15). *Yanukovich: I don't want to be at war, my goal is to restore stable development of country*. [en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/190290.html](http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/190290.html)

presidential office”<sup>13</sup> and “I would like to ask their patrons in the West, those who patronize these dark forces, are you blinded by what is happening? Have you lost your memory? Have you forgotten what fascism is?”<sup>14</sup> However, such a position is massively overstating the case. While “it is true that there are nationalist and neo-fascists movements in Ukraine....their role in the nation’s political life is rather marginal.”<sup>15</sup> Ukraine also adopted several far-right militias into their defense forces in what was then a smaller conflict in the Donbas, which has also been a source of controversy. However, to label the Ukrainian Government as a “fascist junta” is blatantly hyperbolic and solely for political rhetoric. While the question can be raised surrounding the constitutionality of Yanukovich’s ousting, which was dubious to put it lightly, to call the government born out of the revolution “illegitimate” is an anti-democratic position that holds no weight. This idea of fascism (and its association with Naziism) will be discussed further later regarding the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.

As for the second facet of this argument regarding the “popular movements” that led to Crimea’s annexation and the separatist movement in the Donbas, it directly contradicts reality. In the Crimean case, while the position of the Kremlin at the time was that it was a popular referendum, it was revealed a year later that there was a plan in place to “return” Crimea to Russia in an operation that was scheduled to start before Yanukovich was even ousted.<sup>16</sup>

The second argument Kwaśniewski mentions revolves around this notion of Russia being “cheated” by the West following broken promises about eastward NATO expansion. From an

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<sup>13</sup> Yanukovich, V. (2014, March 11). *Transcript: Ukraine’s Viktor Yanukovich on the situation in his country*. The Washington Post. [www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-ukraines-viktor-yanukovich-on-the-situation-in-his-country/2014/03/11/ffb8fefe-a942-11e3-8599-ce7295b6851c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-ukraines-viktor-yanukovich-on-the-situation-in-his-country/2014/03/11/ffb8fefe-a942-11e3-8599-ce7295b6851c_story.html)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Kwaśniewski, A. (2015). Ukrainian-Russian Relations: Lessons for Contemporary International Politics. *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, 2, 22–33. [www.jstor.org/stable/48573451](http://www.jstor.org/stable/48573451), p. 31

<sup>16</sup> Reuters Staff. (2015, March 9). *Putin says plan to take Crimea hatched before referendum*. Reuters. [www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-putin-crimea-idUSKBN0M51DG20150309](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-putin-crimea-idUSKBN0M51DG20150309)

offensive realist's perspective, this is a common reason used as to why Russia reacted the way it did. One notable theorist in this regard is John Mearsheimer. He argues that "the United States and its European allies shoulder most of the responsibility for the crisis. The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrated into the West."<sup>17</sup> He contends that the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO threatened Russia's core strategic interests regarding an important "buffer" state. For Mearsheimer, the threat of a NATO base in Crimea at Sevastopol was enough for him to seize the peninsula. On the other hand, Kwaśniewski argues that "there is wide evidence that there is no causal link between the expansion of NATO in the 1990s and the annexation of Crimea and the undeclared Russian military invasion of Ukraine two decades later."<sup>18</sup> The truth lies somewhere in the middle of these two positions. Mearsheimer rightly points out that directly before Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, Georgia's, as well as Ukraine's, admission into NATO was floated as a possibility at a conference in Bucharest in April of that year. "Alexander Grushko, then Russia's deputy foreign minister, said, 'Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in [NATO] is a huge strategic mistake which would have the most serious consequences for pan-European security.'<sup>19</sup>

However, correlation does not mean causation. The more likely causation stems from Western support for the independence movement of Kosovo earlier in 2008. In his statements about South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the separatist regions of Georgia supported by Russia, then

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<sup>17</sup> Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), 77–89. [www.jstor.org/stable/24483306](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306), p. 77

<sup>18</sup> Kwaśniewski, A. (2015). Ukrainian-Russian Relations: Lessons for Contemporary International Politics. *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, 2, 22–33. [www.jstor.org/stable/48573451](http://www.jstor.org/stable/48573451), p. 29

<sup>19</sup> Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), 77–89. [www.jstor.org/stable/24483306](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306), p. 79

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev repeatedly references Kosovo as being precedent for the independence of these regions, saying “Western countries rushed to recognise Kosovo's illegal declaration of independence from Serbia. We argued consistently that it would be impossible, after that, to tell the Abkhazians and Ossetians (and dozens of other groups around the world) that what was good for the Kosovo Albanians was not good for them.”<sup>20</sup> This focus on Kosovo would seem to allude to Russia’s actions in Georgia to be a tit-for-tat response. Serbia, a long Russian ally due to its historical and cultural ties and an important geopolitical outpost in the Balkans, lost territory due to Western support of an independent Kosovo. Therefore, Russia responds by supporting the independence of a region in a potentially western aligned country like Georgia. This conforms to Kwaśniewski’s position of a lack of a causal link between NATO expansion and Russian aggression, but at the same time Kwaśniewski is underestimating the role threat perception had in putting Russia in a position to potentially respond in a tit-for-tat manner. Tying this into the Crimean annexation, Russia seizing control over Crimea could be seen as a tit-for-tat response as well. The West supports the pro-Western revolution in Ukraine, Russia supports the regions of Ukraine that were more pro-Russian, seizing Crimea and supporting a conflict in the Donbas. However, as Kimberly Marten remarks, “there was nothing obvious that should have triggered this particular choice [referring to Russia’s annexation of Crimea] on Putin’s part, and no one had (at least publicly) predicted it in advance”<sup>21</sup>

This transitions well into the third argument Kwaśniewski discusses is the notion that the world order is going through a transitional phase and Russia must safeguard its own interests. This argument shares many similarities with the second argument, in that Russia’s actions are

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<sup>20</sup> Medvedev, D. (2008, August 26). *Why I had to recognise Georgia's breakaway regions*. Financial Times. [www.ft.com/content/9c7ad792-7395-11dd-8a66-0000779fd18c](http://www.ft.com/content/9c7ad792-7395-11dd-8a66-0000779fd18c)

<sup>21</sup> Marten, K. (2015). Putin’s Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine. *The Washington Quarterly*, 38(2), 189–204. p. 189

motivated by the tenets of realism: self-interest and self-reliance. The problem with using realism to explain why a particular action happened is that it completely discounts the role individual actors, norms, and ideas had in bringing about said action. In particular, Russian nationalism certainly played a role in the annexation of Crimea. “For the first time during his fourteen-year tenure as president or prime minister, Putin used explicitly ethnic nationalist terms to explain and justify his foreign policy moves, calling Crimea ‘primordial Russian land’ and complaining that with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 ‘the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest, ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.’”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, there was a continued emphasis on protecting the Russian-speaking peoples of these regions from the “anti-Russian” government taking power in Kyiv. While the argument can be made from the offensive realist perspective that a perceived anti-Russian threat must be responded to in order to preserve Russia’s core strategic interests, one must look at the underlying motivations for Russia’s response. With statements such as Russian President Vladimir Putin’s above, it becomes clear that the motivations are not about Russia finding its place in realism’s “anarchy,” but about manifesting Russia’s nationalism through returning “rightful” Russian land. In essence, while there is indeed a potential security threat, the Russian government’s rhetoric is spinning it to be more about its own conception of “Russian”-ness.

Moving to the current conflict, many of these same arguments persist in Russia’s current justifications for its “special military operation” in Ukraine. The Russian government has cited three broad reasons justifying its action: protecting the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine, de-Nazifying Ukraine, and security concerns regarding Ukraine joining Western institutions such as the European Union or NATO, all of which were used in some capacity in justifying the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 190



annexation of Crimea. Similarly, the rhetoric coming from President Putin and the Kremlin surrounding its invasion echoes the ethno-nationalistic tones previously mentioned. As Putin spoke to in his address from February 21st, 2022, “[Ukraine] is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us – not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties.”<sup>23</sup> Putin then goes on to tie Ukraine’s very existence to being at Russia’s will, stating “I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia.”<sup>24</sup> Essentially, his message is that Ukraine exists because Russia allowed it. Therefore, to answer the question of what makes Ukraine unique and subject to the Russian invasion, the answer is two-fold. First, Russia views Ukraine as an important piece to a supranational conception of its own nationalism with “Russia” and “Russian” being at the helm of a shared ethnographic history shared by the former Soviet sphere. Second, Ukraine drifting towards Western influence not only qualifies as a potential security threat, but an affront to this shared history at the core of Russia’s national mythology.

### **International Reactions - The European Union**

Moving on to the international reactions to the conflict in Ukraine, with the conflict itself being inherently European in nature, the European Union (EU) has a large stake in both the trajectory of this war as well as its outcome. As such, the EU has taken a firm stance on the side of Ukraine. As the European Council’s website states, “The EU and its member states strongly condemn Russia's brutal, unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine and the

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<sup>23</sup> Putin, V. (2022, February 21). *Russian President Putin Statement on Ukraine*. C-Span. [www.c-span.org/video/?518097-2/russian-president-putin-recognizes-independence-donetsk-luhansk-ukraines-donbas-region](http://www.c-span.org/video/?518097-2/russian-president-putin-recognizes-independence-donetsk-luhansk-ukraines-donbas-region)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*

illegal annexation of Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions.”<sup>25</sup> Despite this apparent unified front on the international organization level, the various countries within the European Union have had differing levels of engagement with the Ukrainian conflict. To focus on two specific positions, France and Germany provide an interesting dichotomy of opinion between key players in the EU, exemplifying the complexity of the conflict for Europe but also the potential the EU has in influencing the conflict’s resolution.

## **France**

Beginning with France’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the best starting point in terms of hashing out current French policy regarding Russia is in 2017 with the election of current French President Emmanuel Macron. Two weeks after his inauguration, Macron hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin at Versailles to discuss, among other things, Syria and Ukraine. Extra importance was placed on this meeting due to Russia’s role in hacking Macron’s campaign during the election and Moscow’s backing of French far-right leader Marine Le Pen. This subject was brought up by reporters at the summit, with Macron stating that “Russian state-backed media outlets RT and Sputnik ‘did not behave like press outlets, but behaved like agents of influence and propaganda’” which spread ‘serious falsehoods.’”<sup>26</sup> Despite this direct attack on Russian media by Macron, he and his government were intent on taking a more cooperative approach in its relationship with Moscow. As a Macron aide said following this initial meeting between Macron and Putin “‘We’re here to act as a safety net, to make sure Europe doesn’t turn

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<sup>25</sup> European Council. (n.d.). *EU response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine*. Retrieved May 9, 2023, from [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/)

<sup>26</sup> Vinocur, N. (2017, May 29). *Macron and Putin's awkward first date*. Politico. [www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-awkward-first-date-versailles/](http://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-awkward-first-date-versailles/)

into a centrifuge that encourages Putin to pivot further toward Asia, and so on ... We are not playing the isolation card.”<sup>27</sup>

This cooperative stance towards Russia, however, has led to some situations that cause French allies to feel nervous. In particular, Macron’s meeting with Putin in August 2019 in Bregancon sparked criticism as it was perceived as an almost reset in Macron’s rhetoric towards Moscow. In an article written soon after this meeting, Jamie Dettmer wrote that “Macron was widely seen as the most bellicose of Western leaders when it came to confronting Moscow over its annexation of Crimea and its fomenting of violent separatism in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Now....his diplomatic outreach is making some of France’s allies nervous.”<sup>28</sup> These diplomatic overtures are perhaps the hallmark of Macron’s pre-conflict approach to Russia, predicated on the “idea of engaging a strategic dialogue with Russia as a necessary step to create an ‘architecture of trust and security’ on the European continent.”<sup>29</sup>

However, this would again change in the lead up to Russia’s invasion. One particular catalyst of this change was when Macron met with Putin two weeks before the Russian invasion in Moscow. In the lead up to the meeting, “Macron said that he hoped the meeting would begin a process of de-escalation, adding: ‘This dialogue is absolutely essential, more than ever, to ensure the security and stability of the European continent.’”<sup>30</sup> However, Macron was met with a

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>28</sup> Dettmer, J. (2019, September 11). *Macron’s Courtship of Putin Alarming Russia’s Near Neighbors*. VOA News. [www.voanews.com/a/europe\\_macrons-courtship-putin-alarming-russias-near-neighbors/6175622.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/europe_macrons-courtship-putin-alarming-russias-near-neighbors/6175622.html)

<sup>29</sup> Faure, J. (2021, May 12). *Macron’s Dialogue With Russia: A French Attempt to Fix the European Security Architecture*. Harvard Kennedy School. [www.russiamatters.org/analysis/macrons-dialogue-russia-french-attempt-fix-european-security-architecture](http://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/macrons-dialogue-russia-french-attempt-fix-european-security-architecture)

<sup>30</sup> Cohen, R., Nechepurenko, I., Breeden, A., Bengali, S., & Troianovski, A. (2022, February 7). *Macron meets Putin in Moscow, aiming for a de-escalation.* The New York Times. [www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/europe/macron-heads-to-moscow-aiming-for-a-de-escalation.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/europe/macron-heads-to-moscow-aiming-for-a-de-escalation.html)

different Putin than the one he spoke with three years previous at Bregancon, with one source on the French delegation stating ““(Putin) gave [Macron] five hours of historical revisionism.””<sup>31</sup>

Since the outset of the conflict, France has been criticized for its lack of military support for Ukraine. While this lack of military support is in part due to the aforementioned focus of Macron and the French government on diplomacy, France also has limited military capabilities compared to the United States and some other NATO allies. While France has a highly capable military, it is smaller and less well-equipped than some other major military powers.

“Nonetheless, the optics are very bad. Macron is running a very real risk of becoming militarily irrelevant in Ukraine, a big problem for a country that wants to create a European army. On the other hand, one could argue that this shambles is the ultimate evidence of why Europe’s military revival is so needed. France’s military paucity is quite shocking.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, it adds fuel to the fire for the critique that France is too soft on Russia, even with Macron being the most “anti-Russian” candidate in France’s most recent elections. Another argument used by French officials to justify France’s tepid contributions is that “Paris has other security responsibilities, namely defending Europe’s southern flank, and must retain some capacity. Sending France’s Leclerc tanks, they say, doesn’t make sense because they are no longer in production and couldn’t easily be replaced.” While this again fits in with the above logic of a limited military not having equipment to spare because of these other security responsibilities, the reality is that the optics of France having a capable military yet not helping as much relative to their capability or ability nonetheless look back.

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<sup>31</sup> Rose, M. (2022, February 10). *In Moscow, Macron found a different, tougher Putin*. Reuters. [www.reuters.com/world/europe/moscow-macron-found-different-tougher-putin-2022-02-10/](http://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moscow-macron-found-different-tougher-putin-2022-02-10/)

<sup>32</sup> Shehadi, S. (2022, October 4). *Opinion: Macron talks the talk, but France’s support for Ukraine is just embarrassing*. Investment Monitor. [www.investmentmonitor.ai/comment/opinion-macron-france-support-for-ukraine-embarrassing/](http://www.investmentmonitor.ai/comment/opinion-macron-france-support-for-ukraine-embarrassing/)

In terms of international relations theory, realism would argue that France's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine can be seen as an attempt to protect its own interests and maintain its position of power in the international system. The crisis in Ukraine threatens to destabilize Eastern Europe and, by extension, could potentially have broader implications for European security. In this context, France may be motivated to take action in order to prevent the situation from escalating further or expanding. As realism argues, France would be motivated to act if a core security issue or interest is at risk, and it is clear through France's rhetoric and statements by President Macron that the war in Ukraine does rise to this level of importance. As the French government sees it, "Russia is pursuing a strategy that seeks to undermine European security"<sup>33</sup>, and by extension, undermines French security. Beyond this current conflict, however, France has long been an advocate for increased self-sufficient European security. France wants Europe to become strategically autonomous from the United States, and sees this conflict as a means to potentially facilitate such a transition. "The war just outside the European Union's borders demonstrates the need to beef up the continent's military capabilities – something which President Emmanuel Macron has advocated since 2017."<sup>34</sup>

Another realist influence on France's reaction to the invasion comes from Russia challenging France's interests in Western Africa. "The reasons for France's waning influence in the Sahel region are multi-faceted, rooted in its colonial history and accelerated by local politics, but its troubles are also a consequence of Russia's ambitions to expand its foothold on the

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<sup>33</sup> Republic of France. (2022, November 9). *National Security Review 2022*. Secretary General of Defense and National Security. [nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29550-41-national-strategic-review-2022](https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29550-41-national-strategic-review-2022)

<sup>34</sup> Zerka, P. (2022, November 21). *The case for defence: How Russia's war on Ukraine has proved France right*. European Council of Foreign Relations. [ecfr.eu/article/the-case-for-defence-how-russias-war-on-ukraine-has-proved-france-right/](https://ecfr.eu/article/the-case-for-defence-how-russias-war-on-ukraine-has-proved-france-right/)

continent, especially since the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.”<sup>35</sup> In recent years, Russia has been ramping up a disinformation campaign, using false accusations against France to “mobilize decolonial, pan-African, conservative, warrior and virile narratives to promote authoritarian regimes that they will even protect militarily.”<sup>36</sup> While these narratives are not inherently bad, their intent, which is to replace France’s military presence in West Africa with the Wagner Group, is certainly detrimental to the French position. This change, which is already underway in countries like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, are perceived positively by the citizens of said countries. In particular, the Soviet legacy on the continent and the crisis in relations between West African nations and France has created a climate in which this Russian engagement is welcome.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, France perceives this shift in the power dynamic as a threat to its global influence, a concept that is already a sore spot in the French public consciousness, as well as to its security interests. As such, in a retaliatory sort of mindset, realism would argue that France would be motivated to assist Ukraine due to Russia “attacking” French interests beyond solely European security.

From the standpoint of liberalism, France is committed to a strategy of utilizing the European Union as a central means to support Ukraine militarily and to cohesively apply sanctions on Russia. As the French Strategic Review from 2022 states, “EU cohesion in its support for Ukraine is a priority. It is imperative that Europeans remain united and proactive, both on sanctions and in support of the Ukrainian armed and security forces....Consistency in

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<sup>35</sup> Kayali, L., & Caulcutt, C. (2023, February 23). *How Moscow chased France out of Africa*. Politico. [www.politico.eu/article/france-africa-russia-emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-mali-central-african-republic-burkina-faso/](https://www.politico.eu/article/france-africa-russia-emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-mali-central-african-republic-burkina-faso/)

<sup>36</sup> Guiffard, J. (2023, January 11). *Anti-french Sentiment in West Africa - A Reflection of the Authoritarian Confrontation With the "Collective West"*. Institut Montaigne. [www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/anti-french-sentiment-west-africa-reflection-authoritarian-confrontation-collective-west](https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/anti-french-sentiment-west-africa-reflection-authoritarian-confrontation-collective-west)

<sup>37</sup> Issaev, L., Shishkina, A., & Liokumovich, Y. (2022). Perceptions of Russia’s ‘return’ to Africa: Views from West Africa. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 1-20.

this matter is needed if Europe is to remain capable of influencing the resolution of the conflict.”<sup>38</sup> Macron and other French politicians have argued that the EU is essential for promoting peace and stability on the continent, as well as for promoting economic growth and prosperity. They have also emphasized the importance of a "European identity" and a common European foreign policy. Additionally, France views the EU as a flexible and adaptable institution with a broad mandate that can address a wide range of issues, allowing for a comprehensive approach to security and to address a wider range of challenges. Along with the aforementioned French wish to have the EU be militarized and for it to be more in charge of its own security, France views the European Union as the most effective vehicle to exert influence in the conflict.

When it comes to NATO, however, the French position is more nuanced. France has long been skeptical of NATO and attempting to shift away from what it viewed as an antiquated institution towards the EU and a more Europe-centric approach to collective security. Paris’ reasoning for this was that France wanted more of a say in NATO affairs, and they viewed the United States as having too much influence within NATO, causing the alliance to be too focused on the interests of the United States. French politicians have also expressed concern that the United States might not be as committed to the defense of Europe as it once was. Perhaps the most notable example of this is with President Macron’s interview with *The Economist* in 2019, where he said “What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO.”<sup>39</sup> However, the Russian invasion seems to at least have given France some food for thought in terms of NATO’s usefulness. “The combination of Europe’s inability to independently assist Ukraine and Putin’s

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<sup>38</sup> Republic of France. (2022, November 9). *National Security Review 2022*. Secretary General of Defense and National Security. [nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29550-41-national-strategic-review-2022](https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29550-41-national-strategic-review-2022)

<sup>39</sup> Macron, E. (2022, October 21). *Emmanuel Macron in his own words*. The Economist. [www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english](https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english)

war crimes represents the crumbling of two foundational notions in French strategic thought that opposed [NATO].”<sup>40</sup> As such, NATO’s new *raison d’être* and proof of American commitment to support Ukraine seems to have, at least temporarily, reaffirmed French faith in the institution.

From a constructivist perspective, there are two central arguments one could make regarding influences to France’s actions surrounding the war in Ukraine: societal perception of what France’s commitments are, and what France wants to be perceived as on the international stage. From a societal standpoint, public opinion in France regarding the war in Ukraine is mixed, with many French people expressing concern about the conflict but also skepticism about France’s role in resolving it. According to polling data from the European Council on Foreign Relations, the French public does not see the consequences of coming to the aid of Ukraine as being worth the risk.<sup>41</sup> Various other polls show that while the French public believes that the conflict is a threat to European security, the majority of people do not want France to play a leading role in resolving it.

From a diplomatic standpoint, France has long held a position of wanting to be a “balancing power” in international relations, using realist language to define its want to serve as mediator in diplomacy. In particular, France has long seen itself as a “bridge” between the Western powers and Russia. During the Cold War, France pursued an independent foreign policy and refused to align with either the United States or the Soviet Union, with former French President Charles de Gaulle famously declaring that “France has no friends, only interests.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Talmor, A. (2022, September). *France Should Embrace the Transatlantic Relationship— and Help Lead It*. Hudson Institute. [media.hudson.org.s3.amazonaws.com/France+Should+Embrace+the+Transatlantic+Relationship+and+Help+Lead+It+-+Angelique+Talmor.pdf](https://media.hudson.org.s3.amazonaws.com/France+Should+Embrace+the+Transatlantic+Relationship+and+Help+Lead+It+-+Angelique+Talmor.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> Krastev, I., & Leonard, M. (2022, February 9). *The crisis of European security: What Europeans think about the war in Ukraine*. European Council on Foreign Relations. [ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-european-security-what-europeans-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-european-security-what-europeans-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine/)

<sup>42</sup> Charles De Gaulle, in Interview, December 9th, 1967



However, to say that France was always inherently neutral would be false. While modern French politicians “use [De Gaulle] to to justify their position....they forget that....despite the fact that De Gaulle of course wanted to preserve France's ability to act on its own he always stood with the US and the Western Bloc in the major crises that they had to go through together and in a way that made him a steadfast ally.”<sup>43</sup> This diplomatic want to be perceived by the international community as a balancing power, in concordance with De Gaulle’s legacy, constructivism argues, would lead France to make decisions that would otherwise go against its strategic interests or institutional aspirations.

As such, in terms of the “best” theoretical approach to take in understanding France’s reaction to the conflict, it seems like a combination of liberalism and constructivism best describes France’s central influences. Primarily, France’s commitment to being a “balancing power” by utilizing multilateral diplomacy as the means to shape the outcome of the war seems to be the driving factor in its decisions to sometimes go against its allies and hold dialogues with Moscow. This is best summarized by Nicholas Vinocur’s article in Politico, where he writes “When asked why France has sometimes pursued a divergent path on Ukraine compared with other Western allies, French officials defend Macron....A French diplomat added: ‘It was either that or do nothing. He [Macron] decided to try diplomacy — I don’t think we can blame him for that.’”<sup>44</sup> Tangentially, this want to be perceived internationally as almost a neutral, or rather as a bridge between Russia and the West, could disincentivize Paris from committing more military aid to Ukraine, despite its wants to be the leading state in a new militarized version of the European Union. This combination of factors seems to outweigh French security concerns under

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<sup>43</sup> The International Institute of Strategic Studies. (2022, November 8). *France's and Germany's responses to Russia's war in Ukraine* [Video]. YouTube. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDSPCujQ50&t=6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDSPCujQ50&t=6s), 26:53

<sup>44</sup> Vinocur, N. (2017, May 29). *Macron and Putin's awkward first date*. Politico. [www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-awkward-first-date-versailles/](https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-awkward-first-date-versailles/)

realism and, at least partially, the generally negative public opinion towards getting involved in the conflict.

## Germany

In some ways, Germany's approach to the Russian war in Ukraine is similar to that of France. Both France and Germany had similar foreign policies that emphasized the importance of keeping Russia close and in the European sphere. In Germany's case, this is due to its foreign policy of *Ostpolitik*, developed by West Germany during the Cold War. *Ostpolitik* is the idea that "economic and political engagement with Moscow would lead to positive change, both within the Soviet Union and in bilateral relations."<sup>45</sup> This approach to Germany's relationship with Russia has subsequently been adopted by the subsequent administrations after its conceptual inception in the 60s and 70s. However, "reconciling the cooperative approach towards Russia with support for human rights and democratic principles was arguably one of the most difficult balancing acts for German politicians."<sup>46</sup> In recent years, this balance has shifted towards the side of promoting human rights and being willing to call out Russia on its human rights abuses. However, there still remains an element of deference given to Russia by Berlin, and newly elected German Chancellor Olaf Scholz arrived in office in December 2021 "having won an election on the back of presenting himself very much as the continuity candidate"<sup>47</sup> However, at least in rhetoric, this deference has markedly changed.

Directly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor Scholz has taken the position that Germany has reached a *Zeitenwende*, or a turning point, in how it must approach its

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<sup>45</sup> Siddi, M. (2016, June). German Foreign Policy towards Russia in the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis: A New Ostpolitik? *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(4), 665-677, p. 665

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 667

<sup>47</sup> The International Institute of Strategic Studies. (2022, November 8). *France's and Germany's responses to Russia's war in Ukraine* [Video]. YouTube. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDSPCujQ50&t=6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDSPCujQ50&t=6s), 15:15

foreign policy. “During a special session convened in the Bundestag [in February 2022], he said his country would have to transform decades of conciliation toward Russia into a clear-eyed will to dissuade President Vladimir Putin from further aggression. Scholz identified the war’s central struggle as ‘whether we permit Putin to turn back the clock to the 19th century....or whether we have it in us to keep warmongers like Putin in check.’”<sup>48</sup>

The scale of this *Zeitenwende* has three central tenets in terms of how it breaks from what are perceived by the German government as policy mistakes of the past. First, there is a prevalent internal debate about Germany's positioning regarding Russia. This internal debate, while needed in the context of Germany needing to understand its own position, has been criticized for its narrow scope and, in some cases, ahistorical nature. “The discussion does not cover the full spectrum of Western positions toward Russia, but rather concentrates almost exclusively on gas, more specifically Nord Stream 2.”<sup>49</sup> The problem with this approach is the further, and perhaps deeper issue, of the longstanding policy of German governments to favor an economic model that assumes a certain level of distance between politics and business, a concept that does not work when two countries are incredibly interconnected. However, this was a discussion that Germany needed to have sooner or later, as a warning when in a dilemma between energy and foreign policy interests.

Second, Germany has recognized the value of having military forces in protecting European security interests. “Russia's invasion of Ukraine has crushed Germany's post-Cold War illusions about a future of peace in Europe and forced the country to begin making its once-

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<sup>48</sup> Bogden, G. (2023, February 27). *Germany's Unkept Promise*. The Atlantic. [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/german-military-olaf-scholz-ukraine-russia-war/673224/](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/german-military-olaf-scholz-ukraine-russia-war/673224/)

<sup>49</sup> Rinke, A. (2022, September 12). *Germany's Flawed Debate about its Russia Policy*. Internationale Politik Quarterly. [ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-flawed-debate-about-its-russia-policy](https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-flawed-debate-about-its-russia-policy)

formidable military strong again.”<sup>50</sup> In its current state, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius warned that the military could not ward off an attack, perhaps best exemplified by a now infamous incident in 2015 with German soldiers using black-painted broomsticks as machine guns during a NATO exercise because they did not have any.<sup>51</sup> In general, Germany has struggled with “The idea that German leadership also involves genuinely taking the lead on security and defense issues and not just sitting back and letting others deal with things for it.”<sup>52</sup> This recognition is a sign of a changing perspective on the concept of German leadership.

Lastly, Germany has altered its perception regarding the ongoing value of NATO from an institution of lowering importance to a vital piece of European defense and transatlantic collaboration. Previous to the outbreak of the conflict, “German society had a lot of reasons not to spend much on NATO and the military....most Germans were just not very worried about being attacked by Russia.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Germany was undermining NATO unity on Russia, seeing NATO maneuvering in preparation for a potential conflict in Ukraine as destabilizing Europe and making a dialogue with Russia more difficult. However, as Berlin thaws on its position of sending weapons to Ukraine, it also perceives NATO as the primary organization that can guarantee the security of its members while also addressing the challenge of improving Europe’s security architecture. For a complete transformation in this regard, however, “German politicians would have to find the courage to confront old demons and start a genuine debate on the values and interests that underwrite Germany’s defense policy in the twenty-first century.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Burdeau, C. (2023, March 31). *Germany, Europe’s powerhouse, is rearming – but slowly*. Courthouse News Service. [www.courthousenews.com/germany-europes-powerhouse-is-rearming-but-slowly/](http://www.courthousenews.com/germany-europes-powerhouse-is-rearming-but-slowly/)

<sup>51</sup> Dearden, L. (2015, February 18). *German army paints broomsticks black to resemble machine guns in Nato exercises*. Independent. [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/german-army-paints-broomsticks-black-to-resemble-machine-guns-in-nato-exercises-10054468.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/german-army-paints-broomsticks-black-to-resemble-machine-guns-in-nato-exercises-10054468.html)

<sup>52</sup> Burdeau, C. (2023, March 31). *Germany, Europe’s powerhouse, is rearming – but slowly*. Courthouse News Service. [www.courthousenews.com/germany-europes-powerhouse-is-rearming-but-slowly/](http://www.courthousenews.com/germany-europes-powerhouse-is-rearming-but-slowly/)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>54</sup> Helferich, J. (2023, April). The (false) promise of Germany's *Zeitenwende*. *European View*, 22(1), 85-95, p. 93

However, there has also been criticism levied at his administration for the speed at which Germany began sending weapons and which weapons were being sent. Perhaps the best example of this was with the German decision to send Leopard 2 battle tanks to Ukraine in January 2023. Scholz “insisted he was right in maintaining his cautious approach, taking the time to negotiate the details of battle tank deliveries rather than rushing ahead unilaterally.... ‘With everything that we do, we must always make very clear that we will do what is necessary and possible to support Ukraine, but at the same time to prevent an escalation of the war to a war between Russia and NATO,’ Scholz added.”<sup>55</sup> Scholz has repeatedly stated a clear German policy of not delivering arms to crisis areas before then turning around a couple of days later and delivering arms to Ukraine. Throughout the conflict, Germany has consistently stated why it cannot send one weapon or another before backtracking shortly after, essentially playing catch-up with its own rhetoric and the reality of the situation in Ukraine.

This leads to a discussion of what *Zeitenwende* actually means in practice. As Sarah Raine states, “*Zeitenwende* certainly doesn't mean leading. In fact, it seems to mean, with regard to Ukraine policy, watching what the US is doing or at least specifically what the White House is doing....and then sort of tucking in behind and....doing just about enough to not get called out too much at least by official counterparts if not by the wider media.”<sup>56</sup> This institutional hesitation present in Germany’s foreign policy towards the conflict is reflective of a history that Germany is reluctant to waver from. As will be discussed further in the theory section regarding Germany, a combination of political history, both in terms of foreign relations as well as party habits, along with public sentiment regarding foreign conflict involvement, has bred a domestic

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<sup>55</sup> Knight, B. (2023, January 25). *Scholz defends decision to send battle tanks to Ukraine*. DW. [www.dw.com/en/german-chancellor-olaf-scholz-defends-decision-to-send-battle-tanks-to-ukraine/a-64509633](http://www.dw.com/en/german-chancellor-olaf-scholz-defends-decision-to-send-battle-tanks-to-ukraine/a-64509633)

<sup>56</sup> The International Institute of Strategic Studies. (2022, November 8). *France's and Germany's responses to Russia's war in Ukraine* [Video]. YouTube. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDSPCujQ50&t=6s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDSPCujQ50&t=6s), 30:09

political situation in which the Bundestag is balancing its want to act with its nature of being deliberate and cautious in its relations with Russia and Eastern Europe.

Moving on to the international theory behind the actions undertaken by Germany, from a realist perspective, Germany's response to the crisis in Ukraine is predicated on its European security interests and its economic interdependence with Russia before the conflict. Beginning with the European security interests position, Germany is a major power in Europe, and its security is closely tied to the stability of the continent. Therefore, Germany has a strong interest in preventing the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which could lead to a wider war. In recent years, Berlin has started to “wake up” to this concern for European security and the proactive role it must take in ensuring it. “Berlin has become less ideologically concerned with the debate over whether this should be via NATO or via the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Instead, it has been pushing pragmatically in favor of using all available instruments to strengthen European security.”<sup>57</sup> To this extent, in response to the needs arising from Russia’s war in Ukraine, Germany is planning to increase its defense budget by as much as €10 billion to help fund military and economic aid to the country.<sup>58</sup> While this pales in comparison to a defense budget like the United States, it is a large commitment for a country still debating the extent it wishes to entangle itself in the conflict.

Another realist consideration is the level of economic interdependence between Germany and Russia before the conflict, particularly regarding energy. In September 2010, the German government published the key policy document detailing its new plan of a green transition of

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<sup>57</sup> Janning, J., & Möller, A. (2016, July). *LEADING FROM THE CENTRE:: GERMANY’S NEW ROLE IN EUROPE*. European Council on Foreign Relations. [www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21585.pdf](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21585.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> Nienaber, M., & Kowalcze, K. (2023, February 15). *Germany to Hike Defense Budget by Up to €10 Billion in 2024*. Bloomberg. [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-15/germany-to-lift-defense-spending-by-up-to-10-billion-next-year](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-15/germany-to-lift-defense-spending-by-up-to-10-billion-next-year)

Germany's energy supply reliant on renewable sources called *Energiewende*. A major component of this plan was to use nuclear power as a bridging technology to help produce energy as the renewable sources were coming online. However, following the disaster at Fukushima in March of 2011, the German government decided to gradually decommission all of its nuclear power sources by 2022, with the last plants going offline in April 2023.<sup>59</sup> In order to supplant this newly created energy problem, Germany turned to Russian natural gas as an inexpensive and readily available alternative. In 2021, "about half of German imports of gas and hard coal, and about one-third of its oil imports, originate from Russia."<sup>60</sup>

However, when making this decision it appears that Berlin did not fully grasp the geopolitical implications of having a significant portion of one's energy sources tied to another country, let alone with Russia. While this is partially due to Germany's *Ostpolitik* and its concept of *Annäherung durch Verflechtung*, or change through interlocking, this decision represented Berlin's "willful failure to think strategically about energy security as a sort of deference to a project that was purely commercial and that needed, if anything, to be protected from geopolitical tensions."<sup>61</sup> In particular, the Nord Stream projects that connected Russian natural gas to Germany via pipeline actively weakened Ukraine's economic position as a energy transit hub between Russia and the rest of Europe, leaving it more susceptible to Russian economic pressure. It would be wrong to call Germany completely naïve to this, as former German Chancellor Angela Merkel "made it clear that there were a number of non-negotiable conditions

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<sup>59</sup> Clifford, C. (2023, April 18). *Germany has shut down its last three nuclear power plants, and some climate scientists are aghast*. CNBC. [www.cnn.com/2023/04/18/germany-shuts-down-last-nuclear-power-plants-some-scientists-aghast.html](http://www.cnn.com/2023/04/18/germany-shuts-down-last-nuclear-power-plants-some-scientists-aghast.html)

<sup>60</sup> Bachmann, R., Baqaee, D., Bayer, C., Kuhn, M., Löschel, A., Moll, B., ... & Schularick, M. (2022). What if Germany is cut off from Russian energy?. *VoxEU.org*, 25, p. 94

<sup>61</sup> The International Institute of Strategic Studies. (2022, November 8). *France's and Germany's responses to Russia's war in Ukraine* [Video]. YouTube. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDSPCujQ50&t=6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDSPCujQ50&t=6s), 9:34

for Nord Stream 2 to operate. These included a contractual agreement that Ukraine would remain a transit country and Russia would not use natural gas supplies as a political weapon.”<sup>62</sup>

However, Russia clearly did not heed this agreement whatsoever. For example, “Russia's political and economic pressure on Ukraine increased quickly after completion of construction of the first new subsea pipeline from Vyborg to Lubmin in late 2012. In August 2013, for example, Moscow blocked all trade between Russia and Ukraine for about a week.”<sup>63</sup> In this way, the realist argument regarding the role of Russian natural gas in Germany’s energy profile is a double edged sword. On one hand, Germany had to give credence to what no longer having access to Russian natural gas could mean for their economy and society. On the other, Germany had to come to terms with the position they had put themselves in of that same natural gas being a root of a threat to European security through Ukraine. As Andreas Umland put it in his article *Germany’s Russia Policy in Light of the Ukraine Conflict: Interdependence Theory and Ostpolitik*, “The Ukrainian case is, thus, a textbook example of the serious consequences of underestimating the role that economic especially energy interdependence between states can play in securing peace.”<sup>64</sup>

Continuing with the economic theme, from a liberal standpoint, Germany’s response can be viewed through the lens of its role within the European Union and implementing sanctions on Russia. Germany has long been the monetary and economic affairs leader within the European Union, mostly due to its position as being the most frugal and financially stable country on the continent. It is not surprising, then that Germany took “the initiative in formulating EU sanctions

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<sup>62</sup> Rinke, A. (2022, September 12). *Germany’s Flawed Debate about its Russia Policy*. Internationale Politik Quarterly. [ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-flawed-debate-about-its-russia-policy](https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-flawed-debate-about-its-russia-policy)

<sup>63</sup> Umland, A. (2022). Germany’s Russia policy in light of the Ukraine conflict: Interdependence theory and Ostpolitik. *Orbis*, 66(1), 78-94, p. 86

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79



against Russia”<sup>65</sup> following the annexation of Crimea. However, Germany has started to expand in its role within the EU. “In the past few years, there have been big shifts in how the German political class view EU politics.... While the dominant narrative since the fall of the Berlin Wall has been about opportunities rather than threats, things look different in 2016....The EU’s neighborhood has become a source of conflict, with a direct impact on cohesion both between EU governments and within European societies.”<sup>66</sup> Within the institutional framework of the EU, Germany has already begun in leading a new discussion of common European security. German leadership has been instrumental in clearing the way for a common European approach to dealing with Russia and the war in Ukraine. “German reluctance had been the major obstacle to strengthened foreign and security policy. But now, with Germany demonstrating a credible will for leadership, [Franco-German security] cooperation has the chance to unleash its full potential.”<sup>67</sup> However, Germany has still not fully stepped up to the plate in terms of utilizing the newer role it has found itself in within the European Union. “Although Berlin is one of Ukraine’s staunchest supporters, Germany’s tepidness about arming Ukraine and its weariness about isolating Russia have tarnished its credibility. In Berlin’s absence, other European states are trying to lead the continent. France is advocating for European autonomy from the United States, and Poland claims to be the new security power on the continent.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, it remains to be seen whether or not Germany will fully embrace the capability of the EU in projecting power beyond economic sanctions.

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<sup>65</sup> Siddi, M. (2016, June). German Foreign Policy towards Russia in the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis: A New Ostpolitik? *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(4), 665-677, p. 665

<sup>66</sup> Janning, J., & Möller, A. (2016, July). *LEADING FROM THE CENTRE:: GERMANY’S NEW ROLE IN EUROPE*. European Council on Foreign Relations. [www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21585.pdf](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21585.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>68</sup> David-Wilp, S. (2023, April 17). *Germany Still Hasn’t Stepped Up*. Foreign Affairs. [www.foreignaffairs.com/germany/germany-still-hasnt-stepped](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/germany/germany-still-hasnt-stepped)

There are also domestic liberalism considerations at play due to the makeup of the coalition government in the Bundestag. The current governing coalition is made up of three parties, the Social Democratic Party, or SPD, the Greens, which is the Green party, and the Free Democratic Party, or FDP. While each of these parties are left-leaning, they have differing histories in terms of their political base and roots that influence their policy making towards the conflict in Ukraine today. In particular, the SPD and the Greens, the two larger parties in the governing coalition, have bases and histories that greatly impact their respective positions on Ukraine.

The Social Democratic Party has its roots in the socialist parties and Worker's associations of the 1860s and 70s. However, following its ban during the Nazi regime, it was re-established in Western Germany shortly after the end of World War II. In terms of its policy towards the then Soviet Union during the Cold War, "The SPD's *Ostpolitik*...was originally conceived as a German contribution to detente that was compatible with and fully accounted for Germany's specific national interests, a policy which was made possible as a result of the international realities in the 1960s."<sup>69</sup> In creating this vision, the SPD was attempting to construct a new foreign policy that through its contributions towards detente in Europe, would give West Germany a greater say in international affairs. At the time, however, this version of *Ostpolitik* was not unanimously praised. Critics viewed the policy as selling out German national interests while also making a future reunification impossible. However, by the 1980s, even the main opposition party to the SPD, the Christian Democratic Union, or CDU, made *Ostpolitik* a part of their political platform. In many ways, the SPD sees its *Ostpolitik* as one if not its greatest policy successes. This romanticization, however, has now become problematic in light of the

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<sup>69</sup> Freyberg, S. (2009). *The International Dimension of the SPD and the PCI: Europe, the Cold War and Detente* (Doctoral dissertation).

Russian invasion, with the central pillars of change through rapprochement and trade having proved lacking in its ability to prevent conflict in Ukraine.

The history of the Greens is much shorter than the SPD's, as its party was born out of the environmental, pacifist, and anti-nuclear movements in the late 1970s and early 80s. However, the pacifist nature of the party's origins has been slowly shifted away from. "Russia's war in Ukraine has prompted Germany's Greens to take another big step away from their pacifist roots and emerge as the most hawkish members of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition government."<sup>70</sup> The justification for this switch is that the Green party leaders see no other choice, especially given the SPD's history of cultivating close ties to Russia and the aforementioned struggles they are having coming to terms with that. As Marieluise Beck, a founding member of the Greens, argued "Of course, pacifist currents have shaped the Greens, but we have also always been a party that promotes and defends human rights, rule of law and democracy....Our image of Russia has never been as glorified as that of Social Democrats."<sup>71</sup> On top of this, Beck sees the Greens as the most capable party in reacting swiftly to the changes and challenges brought about by the Russian invasion. As such, the Greens have been receiving a large boost in political and popular support, for not only their outspoken anti-Russian position but their renewable energy agenda picking up steam following the realization of the need to decouple the country from Russian energy. With this being said, however, it is certainly telling that the party that advocates the most for German military support for Ukraine is the same party dealing with its pacifist past.

A bridge between the liberal and constructivist arguments surrounding Germany's reaction is the need for reformation around *Ostpolitik* and the domestic and international policy

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<sup>70</sup> Von Der Burchard, H. (2022, April 22). *From doves to über-hawks: Ukraine war recasts Germany's Greens*. Politico. [www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-recasts-germany-green-party-russia/](http://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-recasts-germany-green-party-russia/)

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

ramifications of that. *Ostpolitik* was built on a uncompromising realist worldview “that showed the cold shoulder to the budding civil rights movements in Central and Eastern Europe and relied on sometimes dubiously close relations with Communist regimes.”<sup>72</sup> The failure of the original *Ostpolitik*, in retrospect, was that Germany believed that the end of the Soviet Union marked a transformation of Russia that was irreversible and, tangentially, that the Western model was so appealing that economic interdependence would inevitably result in change. “Even when Russian President Vladimir Putin finally established his autocratic system and repeatedly instigated wars in Russia’s neighborhood, Germany persisted with dialogue. All that remained of *Ostpolitik*, really, were economic relations, yet [Germany] continued to nurse the assumption that interdependence would rein in Russia.”<sup>73</sup> Essentially, what ended up occurring was the Germany benefited so much from the economic partnership from Russia that the trade between the two nations was being facilitated without any conditions for Moscow, and the economic and political cost of changing course became untenable. As such, this conflict has forced both the German government and German public to come to terms with the fact that the *Ostpolitik* that has long been romanticized is in dire need of reform.

Moving to the societal side of the constructivist argument, the German public’s opinion on the conflict in Ukraine also influences Berlin’s decisions. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, “German public opinion reacted to the Ukrainian crisis in a rather ambivalent way, but came to support its own government’s and the EU’s policy, including the sanctions against Russia....German public opinion wanted to see their country as a mediator rather than as a party

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<sup>72</sup> Roth, M. (2022, July 15). *Op-Ed: A New Ostpolitik for the “Watershed Moment”*. Internationale Politik Quarterly. [ip-quarterly.com/en/op-ed-new-ostpolitik-watershed-moment](https://ip-quarterly.com/en/op-ed-new-ostpolitik-watershed-moment)

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*

to the crisis, and a clear majority ruled out military assistance to Ukraine.”<sup>74</sup> However, the current invasion has stoked a different reaction from the German public. “Early post-invasion surveys hence stand to some extent in contrast to traditional findings of German public opinion....They suggest a shift from restraint to a more assertive posture. Against this backdrop, a constraint that may have prevented German policymakers from assuming such a posture in the past might be loosening.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, the aforementioned argument under liberalism regarding the constraints placed on the German government due to the nature of the governing coalition may become less restrictive.

However, according to Matthias Mader and Harald Schoen, “at present, there seems to be no mandate for a fundamental change in Germany’s foreign and security policy orientation.”<sup>76</sup> While the German public’s perception of the Russian invasion has certainly changed, their perception of the underlying thematic elements of *Ostpolitik* and the general approach of German foreign policy do not appear to have been fundamentally altered by the ongoing conflict. This creates a disconnect between the rhetoric of Olaf Scholz mentioned earlier regarding the invasion being a *Zeitenwende* for German foreign policy and the relative stability of the German public’s opinion regarding German foreign policy. Furthermore, similar to the aforementioned hesitancy in the *Zeitenwende* system, the German public is heavily divided along geographical, ideological, and generational lines as to how Germany should act regarding Ukraine, with younger, more liberal people from Western Germany being more in support of military aid for Ukraine while, older, more conservative people from Eastern Germany being generally less supportive of

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<sup>74</sup> Forsberg, T.. (2016). From “Ostpolitik” to “frostpolitik”? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy towards Russia. *International Affairs* (London), 92(1), 21–42. doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12505, p.36

<sup>75</sup> Mader, M., & Schoen, H. (2023). No *Zeitenwende* (yet): Early Assessment of German Public Opinion Toward Foreign and Defense Policy After Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 1-23, p. 3

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p.19

military aid. However, what seems to be shared across German society is a deep consideration of what getting entangled in a conflict entails. “Since the end of World War II Germany has adopted a ‘strong anti-militaristic culture’ which is now deeply embedded in the German psyche.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, “Public opinion [had] long been skeptical toward international involvement and did not display much willingness to confront Russia.”<sup>78</sup> In this way, the German public and the Bundestag share a sentiment best expressed by Olaf Scholz at the Munich Security Conference in February 2023: “There’s no blueprint for what needs to be done in this situation. I believe we would do well to carefully weigh up all the consequences of our actions and closely coordinate all key steps among the Allies. For this is a war in our neighborhood, in Europe – a dangerous war. And despite all the pressure to take action, which undoubtedly exists: in this key question, caution must take priority over hasty decisions, unity over solo actions.”<sup>79</sup>

There is also another constructivist sentiment regarding the role of Germany in ensuring peace due to its history. As a joint statement made by Green and Liberal Democratic politicians made in October 2022 states, “‘As a country responsible for the worst human rights crimes in Europe—especially in Poland and the countries of the former Soviet Union—we have a special obligation to restore and secure peace’” and to prevent human-rights violations.”<sup>80</sup> The liberal side of German politics argues that the lessons of German history compel Germany to prevent conflict in Europe, even if that means military involvement. However, many other Germans have taken the exact opposite lesson. “The lesson of 1945, as broadly understood until now, was that

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<sup>77</sup> Schmidt, N., Tanno, S., & Otto, C. (2023, January 28). *Berlin made the historic move to arm Ukraine. But many Germans are uneasy*. CNN. [www.cnn.com/2023/01/28/europe/germany-mood-leopard-ukraine-intl/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2023/01/28/europe/germany-mood-leopard-ukraine-intl/index.html)

<sup>78</sup> Driedger, J. (2022). Inertia and Reactiveness in Germany's Russia Policy: From the 2021 Federal Election to the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022. *German Politics and Society*, 40(4), 135-151, p.140

<sup>79</sup> Scholz, O. (2023, February 17). *Speech at the 2023 Munich Security Conference*. [www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/speech-by-chancellor-scholz-at-the-munich-security-conference-on-17-february-2023-in-munich-2166536](http://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/speech-by-chancellor-scholz-at-the-munich-security-conference-on-17-february-2023-in-munich-2166536)

<sup>80</sup> Applebaum, A. (2022, October 20). *Germany Is Arguing With Itself Over Ukraine*. The Atlantic. [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/germany-military-aid-ukraine-tanks-debate/671804/](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/germany-military-aid-ukraine-tanks-debate/671804/)

Germany should prevent war at all costs by refusing to engage in one, no matter what the stakes, especially in Europe.”<sup>81</sup> This divide in perception of what Germany should be in terms of an international peacekeeper adds onto the aforementioned issues of the current governing coalition in the Bundestag. As Anne Applebaum writes, “In truth, *some* Germans are ready to lead, *some* Germans have re-learned the lessons of history, and *some* Germans are beginning to convince their compatriots that the world has changed, and that they have to change along with it. They haven’t quite won that argument yet. When they finally do...*Zeitenwende* will finally become real.”<sup>82</sup>

The best theoretical lens for understanding Germany’s reaction, then, would appear to be a combination of realist economic concerns and the liberal and constructivist entanglement at the heart of *Ostpolitik*. It is clear that at the heart of Germany's decision making and debates around Ukraine is a discussion of the economic implications arising from Germany and Russia having been entangled, particularly in the energy sector. However, it is also clear that the legacy and current implications of *Ostpolitik*, its successes in the past and the failures now, have greatly impacted the leading party of the German governing coalition, the SPD, as well as the general public’s associated perception of *Ostpolitik* that is romanticized to the point of people being hesitant to change from what had previously been the norm. Change is uncomfortable, and whether or not Scholz’s *Zeitenwende* will actually be a grand change in Germany’s relations with Moscow remains to be seen.

### **People’s Republic of China**

On February 18th, 2023, Chinese senior diplomat Wang Li spoke before the Munich Security Conference. In his speech, Wang describes the intentions of China to act as a mediator

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*

in the “Ukraine crisis,” emphasizing the need for global cooperation and mutual security. He stated that “[China] did not sit idly by, we do not add fuel to the fire and we are against reaping benefits from the crisis.”<sup>83</sup> China’s reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however, is ambiguous. It is caught between the strategic imperatives of being a Russian ally while not drawing international ire or sanctions for any support it could send, while also recognizing the potential geopolitical opportunities and risks of getting itself involved in the conflict in some capacity. As Yun Sun writes “In response to increasing strategic competition with the United States, China is turning to Russia for support, despite misalignment between Beijing and Moscow’s national interests, as well as Russia’s history as a destructive and exploitative neighbor.”<sup>84</sup> China’s pro-Russian “neutrality” is the cornerstone of its reaction to the conflict in Ukraine, with its newfound identity as a global superpower and perception of its role in reshaping the geopolitical landscape guiding Chinese actions or, for the majority of this conflict, inaction.

As alluded to above, China has taken very little concrete action in regard to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; only recently with the aforementioned Munich Security Conference almost one year after the beginning of the conflict has China displayed any sort of intent to serve as a mediator or have some active role in resolving the conflict beyond broad diplomatic overtures. However, the Chinese reaction to the “Ukraine crisis” follows a familiar script to their reaction to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, or to the Minsk Agreements talks in 2016; China abstains from the U.N. Security Council resolution regarding the particular conflict, makes

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<sup>83</sup> Wang, Y. (2023, February 18). *Speech at the 2023 Munich Security Conference* [Speech video recording]. BR24. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrunZDxYDzo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrunZDxYDzo)

<sup>84</sup> Sun, Y. (2022, March 4). *CHINA’S STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT OF RUSSIA: MORE COMPLICATED THAN YOU THINK*. War on the Rocks. [warontherocks.com/2022/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-russia-more-complicated-than-you-think/](https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-russia-more-complicated-than-you-think/)



diplomatic statements emphasizing the need for both sides to exercise restraint, all the while having pro-Russian overtones in its messaging and language surrounding the conflict. In the case of the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, it began with China refusing to call Russia’s “special military operation” an invasion. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying, in a press conference on the first day of the conflict, stated “As to the definition of ‘invasion’, it brings us back to how we view the current situation in Ukraine. As we have stated repeatedly, the Ukraine issue has a very complicated historical background and context....When the US took illegal unilateral military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan without the mandate of the UN and caused massive civilian casualties, did you use the word ‘invasion’ or some other word?”<sup>85</sup> While Hua said that China viewed Ukraine as a sovereign country, she continued to refuse to call Russia’s actions an invasion, instead deflecting “blame” onto the United States, stating “[The U.S.] started the fire and fanned the flames, how are they going to put out the fire now?”<sup>86</sup>

The stated position of China regarding the war has three tenets: the territorial integrity of Ukraine, protecting national security interests (of Russia), and opposing unilateral sanctions (in reference to the United States). On the one year anniversary of the invasion, China released a 12 point statement regarding its vision of resolving the conflict. These points went further than its three central positions, expanding on the facilitation of peace talks as well as the Chinese vision for post-conflict reconstruction. Through these points, along with a “charm offensive” with senior diplomat Wang Li’s recent trip around Europe, China is trying to maneuver itself into a position as an international peacemaker while not condemning Russian actions or calling for a Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territory. China’s pro-Russian “neutrality” and ambiguous

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<sup>85</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022.*

[www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202202/t20220224\\_10645282.html](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220224_10645282.html)

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*

foreign policy position leads to inherent contradictions in its response to the conflict. For example, while China has continually made statements supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine, it has simultaneously refused to advocate for the physical enforcement of it.

Moving to how international relations theory describes the Chinese reaction to the conflict, realism argues that the motivations behind China's impartial neutrality is twofold. First, China's reaction could be perceived as an application of "balance of power" theory, where China's pro-Russian neutrality can be seen as balancing against NATO interests in Ukraine. "China and Russia are pushed together by two factors. The first is the shared threat the United States poses. The second is a leader-level nostalgia for the Sino-Soviet partnership. The most salient characteristic of the Sino-Russian alignment today is their shared threat perception of the United States."<sup>87</sup> In essence, China's balancing, while in some ways balancing against NATO/American hegemonic power, is also motivated by an element of international pressure in which China does not want to feel "alone" against the United States. Beyond the realist drive of balancing power, there is little other binding agent between the strategic goals of Russia and China that would bring the two powers together, giving further credence to the strength of balance of power theory. "China and Russia differ significantly in how they view their roles in, and relationship with, the international system. As Xi Jinping has indicated, China has been a beneficiary of the international system since the end of the Cold War. Xi therefore seeks to reform the system, but he does not seek to replace it."<sup>88</sup> As such, if there is no longer shared alignment in the anarchical international system that incentivizes China to lean towards Russia, their partnership will go with it.

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<sup>87</sup> Sun, Y. (2022, March 4). *CHINA'S STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT OF RUSSIA: MORE COMPLICATED THAN YOU THINK*. War on the Rocks. [warontherocks.com/2022/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-russia-more-complicated-than-you-think/](https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-russia-more-complicated-than-you-think/)

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*

Second, realism would argue that China has a vested interest in acting as a potential mediator to this conflict in order to advance its own strategic interests in the region. In particular, the main means China is currently pursuing in this regard is its Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or One Belt One Road (OBOR), is “China’s intention to create a global international project uniting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.”<sup>89</sup> The project is made up of joint construction projects in 141 countries around the world, intended “to find, form, and promote a new model of international cooperation and development by strengthening the existing regional and global mechanisms and structures of interaction with China’s participation.”<sup>90</sup> In the Ukrainian case, “the possible participation of Ukraine in the OBOR initiative for continental infrastructural integration may present both challenges and opportunities”<sup>91</sup> for China. While it is not directly on the path of three central intended economic “pathways” for the BRI, Ukraine holds a strategic location as a sort of gateway into Europe from Asia, a position enhanced by its free trade agreement with the European Union and future EU membership. However, the ongoing conflict has made it increasingly difficult for China to fund BRI projects, let alone investments with Ukraine itself. Furthermore, “China is at a crossroads because it is putting its Belt and Road Initiative under a microscope before the international community for having taken no clear official position on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.”<sup>92</sup> China’s complicated position as pro-Russian but neutral puts itself between a rock and hard place, in that supporting Ukraine economically would go against

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<sup>89</sup> Gan, K. (2021) Ukrainian-Chinese Relations in the framework of Belt and Road Initiative: perspectives, problems, and cultures interactions. *Ukrainian Policymaker*, Volume 8, 36-40. doi.org/10.29202/up/8/4, p. 37

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37

<sup>91</sup> Kianytsia, L (2019). The One Belt One Road Initiative as a New Silk Road: The (Potential) Place of Ukraine. *Ukrainian Policymaker*, Volume 4, 21-26. doi.org/10.29202/up/4/3, p. 24

<sup>92</sup> Mendez, A. & Forcadell, F. & Horiachko, K. (2022, September). "Russia–Ukraine crisis: China’s Belt Road Initiative at the crossroads," *Asian Business & Management*, vol. 21(4), 488-496, p. 495

its quasi-alliance with Russia, while also further scrutinizing the BRI by not having a firm position. Looking into the future, however, “In the long term, there are opportunities for China to get involved in the reconstruction of a war-ravaged Ukraine. The devastation creates a necessity to rebuild and, therefore, an opportunity to be the rebuilder.”<sup>93</sup> China could hypothetically wait the conflict out and still achieve its end goal of accruing influence in the region.

This leads well into a discussion of constructivism’s point of view on the conflict. There are three main arguments made by constructivist theory regarding China’s reaction to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the first being China’s identity as a rising global power. “As China’s development has entered a new stage, there is increasing uncertainty over China’s identity and roles.”<sup>94</sup> In some ways, China is almost insecure about its position due to its traditional *weltanschauung*, or self-perception or identity, and how that influences its nationalism. There are two distinct aspects to this self-perception, “ (1) China is an aggrieved nation that has endured a “century of shame and humiliation” and various indignities at the hands of the West and Japan; and (2) China has been a great power historically and deserves to return to that status.”<sup>95</sup> These thoughts lie at the very center of China’s domestic debates of what it actually means to be a great power, and what responsibilities come with the role. In a sense, it is a level of unfamiliarity brought about by Western mistreatment that influences this insecurity about Beijing’s powerful position today. One of the core internal questions of this new found status is how China should position itself internationally, a question that has become an increasingly hot topic. “There are four reasons why international positioning has become an

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p. 496

<sup>94</sup> Pu, X. (2017) Controversial Identity of a Rising China, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 10, Issue 2, 131–149, doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pox004, p. 148

<sup>95</sup> Shambaugh, D. (2007, September 14). *China’s Identity as a Major Power*. George Washington University. [www2.gwu.edu/~sigur/assets/docs/major\\_powers\\_091407/Shambaugh\\_on\\_China.pdf](http://www2.gwu.edu/~sigur/assets/docs/major_powers_091407/Shambaugh_on_China.pdf), p. 1

important topic: first, the rapid transformation of the international system; secondly, China faces growing structural pressure; thirdly, China is confused about its identity and role; and finally, the international community has growing expectations of China, and is becoming more suspicious of China's role."<sup>96</sup> The ongoing conflict in Ukraine represents an opportunity to test how it should position itself as a global superpower, and to ascertain what strategies work and which do not.

The second constructivist argument on China's reaction is China's foreign policy principle of non-interventionism and the norm that has developed. This non-intervention principle is a fundamental tenet of Beijing's foreign policy, rooted in the country's history with foreign intervention. China has experienced numerous instances of foreign intervention in its internal affairs, including the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, and the Japanese invasion during World War II. These experiences have led to a deep-seated distrust of foreign interference in China's domestic affairs, reflected in China's perception of the importance of national sovereignty and independence.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, China's principle of non-interventionism underwent change in response to changing global circumstances. With the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization, China no longer needed to avoid being drawn into the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in particular, China began to adopt a more assertive foreign policy and began to engage more actively in international organizations and the international community as a whole. This has led to contradictions within its non-interventionist policy and critiques surrounding its purpose. As Sovinda Po writes, "Beijing's policy of non-interference contributes to its core national interest in several ways. Most significantly, it provides a key means for Beijing to differentiate its "going

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<sup>96</sup> Pu, X. (2017) Controversial Identity of a Rising China, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 10, Issue 2, 131–149, doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pox004, p. 137

out” policy from that of former colonial powers, which it seeks to simultaneously position as imperialist ‘interferers.’”<sup>97</sup> China frames its non-interventionism in ideological terms; it is important for Beijing that its actions are not perceived as imperialist or related to the same imperial powers that created the distrust of foreign powers at the root of the original non-interventionist policy. On top of this, the international perception of what qualifies as a nation intervening in another’s affairs has changed over time. “Chinese involvement or interference in another state’s economic and political development, playing a mediating role, seeking to actively participate in nation-building etc. is no longer defined as intervention.”<sup>98</sup> As such, this notion of non-interference within Beijing’s ethos is also able to achieve the aforementioned realist end of expanding Chinese influence as a rising global power.

The third constructivist argument on China’s position on Ukraine is that China’s actions are heavily influenced by international pressure and how getting involved on Russia’s side would affect their global image. While Russia’s global image has certainly declined due to the invasion, there is an extra level of importance regarding China’s image abroad, that being the ramifications of its “warrior wolf diplomacy.” Warrior wolf diplomacy, which etymologically comes from a 2017 Chinese film *Warrior Wolf 2* with a not-so-subtle tagline “Whoever attacks China will be killed no matter how far the target is,”<sup>99</sup> is shorthand for the new, assertive, and hardline foreign policy Beijing has adopted. “In the past, Chinese diplomats tended to keep a lower profile and to be quite cautious and moderate in the way that they interacted with the outside world. Recently, however, they have become far more strident and assertive—exhibiting behavior that ranges

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<sup>97</sup> Po, Sovinda, and Kearnin Sims. “The myth of non-interference: Chinese foreign policy in Cambodia.” *Asian Studies Review* 46.1 (2022): p. 39

<sup>98</sup> Sørensen, Camilla TN. “That is not intervention; that is interference with Chinese characteristics: New concepts, distinctions and approaches developing in the Chinese debate and foreign and security policy practice.” *The China Quarterly* 239 (2019) p. 604

<sup>99</sup> Jing, W. (Director). (2017). *Warrior Wolf 2* [Film]. Deng Feng International Media.

from storming out of an international meeting to shouting at foreign counterparts and even insulting foreign leaders.”<sup>100</sup> As one may surmise, this more assertive and combative tone when it comes to promoting Chinese interests has not made as many friends as it has lost. However, in recent years, China has begun shifting around its foreign policy personnel, which “some political analysts view...as possible signs that China may be pivoting from the hardline "wolf-warrior" diplomacy that has characterized China's foreign policy.”<sup>101</sup> While these analysts qualify this view with a skepticism that the underlying foreign policy will change much, especially given the domestic popularity of the stance,<sup>102</sup> this action could be a sign that China is giving extra credence to its global perception.

The liberal argument regarding China’s reaction is a lot less multi-faceted compared to the realist and constructivist positions, in that it is squarely centered around China’s Belt and Road Initiative. As was stated in the earlier section surrounding the realist aspects of the BRI, China has put itself in a tough situation where not supporting Ukraine economically could potentially damage this institution that it has spent years and political power investing in. In some ways, liberalism could argue that China is incentivized to support Ukraine from its economic commitments to Ukraine through the BRI. However, there is another institutional dynamic at play here that is outside the bounds of the aforementioned discussion under realism, which has to do with the economic sanctions placed upon the Russian energy sector. “The [People’s Republic of China] could capitalize on opportunities created by the Ukraine conflict with synergies within its BRI long-term strategy....Once the Chinese energy giants, such as

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<sup>100</sup> Nawrotkiewicz, J. (2021, October 22). *Interview with Peter Martin*. National Bureau of Asian Research. [www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/](http://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/)

<sup>101</sup> Yang, W. (2023, January 18). *Is China pivoting away from 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy?* DW. [www.dw.com/en/is-china-pivoting-away-from-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/a-64435396](http://www.dw.com/en/is-china-pivoting-away-from-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/a-64435396)

<sup>102</sup> Yaoyao, D & Luqui, L. (2022, May). *Wolf Warriors and Diplomacy in the New Era: An Empirical Analysis of China’s Diplomatic Language*. *China Review* 22(2), 253-283. [www.jstor.org/stable/48671506](http://www.jstor.org/stable/48671506)

Sinopec, China National Petroleum Corp and China National Offshore Oil Corp, learn the fine print of sanctions and how to circumvent them, they will probably be able to replace and fill the void left behind by the retreat of Western firms.”<sup>103</sup> As such, the BRI is benefitting from the conflict in general by allowing China more room in expanding its own presence with the BRI framework.

Combining the observations of these theories, China’s reaction to the conflict appears to be best explained by the realist and constructivist positions of China’s identity as and reality of being a rising power seeking to expand its influence in the region without upsetting one of the few quasi-allies it has. Unlike the previous European Union examples, China’s reaction to the conflict does not involve some form of personal stake or direct security concern, but rather is tangentially entangled due to its ambitions as a new global power. Beijing is trying its best to politically maneuver itself into a position in which no matter how the conflict ends, it will benefit.

### **The United States**

The American response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is reflective of how the United States treats its national interests and how that differs from how it behaves in times of perceived crises. “Before February 24, 2022, most Americans agreed that the United States had no vital interests at stake in Ukraine. ‘If there is somebody in this town that would claim that we would consider going to war with Russia over Crimea and eastern Ukraine,’ U.S. President Barack Obama said in an interview with *The Atlantic* in 2016, ‘they should speak up.’”<sup>104</sup> The United States oscillates between periods of restraint, indifference, and inward focus to periods of

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<sup>103</sup> Prebilič, V., & Jereb, V. (2022). Implications of the war in Ukraine on the Belt and Road Initiative. *Journal of Geography, Politics and Society*, 12(2), 1–7. doi.org/10.26881/jpgs.2022.2.01, p. 5

<sup>104</sup> Kagan, R. (2023, January). A Free World, If You Can Keep It. *Foreign Affairs*, 102(1), 39-53. p. 39



extreme global engagement and interventionism. In the case of Crimea, it was the former. Now, it is the latter.

On May 31st, 2022 in an article in the *New York Times*, President Joe Biden outlined America's position as follows: "America's goal is straightforward: We want to see a democratic, independent, sovereign and prosperous Ukraine with the means to deter and defend itself against further aggression."<sup>105</sup> In tandem with this, Biden outlined America's strategic vision for the region, focusing on cooperation with America's allies and partners on Russian sanctions, providing military aid, and reducing Europe's dependence on Russian fossil fuels. In addition, Biden's "principle throughout this crisis has been 'Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine.' I will not pressure the Ukrainian government — in private or public — to make any territorial concessions. It would be wrong and contrary to well-settled principles to do so."<sup>106</sup> This quote makes an obvious allusion to the Munich Conference in the lead up to World War II, with the obvious complaint of Czechoslovakia regarding that "betrayal" as being about them without them. It is clear that the United States is committed to approach the crisis from a multilateral angle that ensures that Ukraine walks out of this conflict in the same if not better state than it went in.

From a more tangible perspective, Biden's administration has sent \$76.8 billion in aid, with \$46.6 billion being military aid and the rest being humanitarian and financial.<sup>107</sup> As such, the United States has by far the most aid sent to Ukraine, which makes sense given America's ability to flex its military might in a much stronger way than any other country can. As the US

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<sup>105</sup> Biden, J. (2022, May 31). President Biden: What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine. *The New York Times*. [www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html)

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>107</sup> Masters, J., & Merrow, W. (2023, February 22). *How Much Aid Has the U.S. Sent Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts*. Council on Foreign Relations. [www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts](http://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts)

Department of State states on their fact sheet regarding its security cooperation with Ukraine: “Ukraine is a key regional strategic partner that has undertaken significant efforts to modernize its military and increase its interoperability with NATO. It remains an urgent security assistance priority to provide Ukraine the equipment it needs to defend itself against Russia’s war against Ukraine.”<sup>108</sup>

However, at the domestic level, there is an increasing level of opposition to the continued involvement of the United States. In particular, there is a growing divide within the Republican Party whether or not to assist Ukraine in its war against Russia. As Republican Senator John Thune stated when he was asked about the matter “There are lots of different opinions on the U.S. involvement in Ukraine. But I think the majority opinion among Senate Republicans is that the United States has a vital national security interest there in stopping Russian aggression. And that certainly the view I have.”<sup>109</sup> However, this is not the position further right members of the Republican Party have been holding in public. Their argument has three prevalent positions within their discourse, those being that the war is expensive without an obvious win condition, that Ukraine is corrupt and in Russia’s sphere of influence, and that the US should not risk an escalation with Russia when the “real threat” is China. As Florida Governor Ron DeSantis stated on the conflict “While the U.S. has many vital national interests, becoming further entangled in a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia is not one of them.”<sup>110</sup> While this position on the war is noteworthy from an American political context, it does not show signs of being remotely

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<sup>108</sup> Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. (2023, May 9). *U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine*. United States Department of State. [www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/](http://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/)

<sup>109</sup> Desjardins, L., Schiffrin, N., Schmitz, A., & Khan, S. (Hosts). (2023, March 15). U.S. support for Ukraine an increasingly divisive issue among Republicans [Radio broadcast]. In *Newshour*. PBS. [www.pbs.org/newshour/show/u-s-support-for-ukraine-an-increasingly-divisive-issue-among-republicans](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/u-s-support-for-ukraine-an-increasingly-divisive-issue-among-republicans)

<sup>110</sup> Forrest, J. (2023, March 15). *DeSantis saying Ukraine support is not ‘vital’ national interest sparks backlash in GOP*. CNN. [www.cnn.com/2023/03/14/politics/desantis-republicans-ukraine-aid/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2023/03/14/politics/desantis-republicans-ukraine-aid/index.html)

close to becoming the reality of the United States' response to Russia's invasion. Rather, it is better described as the rantings of an overly vocal minority within the American public consciousness.

When it comes to realism's position on the United States' response, the argument for involvement revolves around maintaining a balance of power in Eastern Europe that is beneficial for American interests in the region. In a general sense, this means combatting the growth of Russian influence in the region. Eastern Europe has traditionally been within the sphere of influence of Russia, and the United States has been concerned about the potential for Russia to reassert its control in the region. This has led the United States to support the countries of Eastern Europe in their efforts to develop strong and independent democracies, free from Russian interference. This realist position differs from America's European allies, due to it, in a tenor similar to what was discussed in terms of the People's Republic of China, not having a direct stake in the security of the region. Thus, the United States is primarily motivated by its own self-interest rather than a security interest, seeking to maximize its power in a region that has many competing interests.

Liberalism's position on the US's response to Russia's invasion is centered around NATO and the multilateral response to support Ukraine. The US has worked closely with its allies in Europe to coordinate their response to Russia's aggression. The United States, through NATO, has provided political and diplomatic support to Ukraine through regular meetings between NATO officials and Ukrainian government representatives, military training and assistance to Ukrainian armed forces, as well as provided non-lethal military equipment. Furthermore, the US has advocated for a greater NATO presence in the Black Sea region and Eastern Europe, serving as a deterrence against further Russian aggression and demonstrating

NATO's commitment to the region. Furthermore, this conflict has been a means to expand NATO and by extension America's liberal world order in the process. As President Biden stated: "We will also continue reinforcing NATO's eastern flank with forces and capabilities from the United States and other allies. And just recently, I welcomed Finland's and Sweden's applications to join NATO, a move that will strengthen overall U.S. and trans-Atlantic security by adding two democratic and highly capable military partners."<sup>111</sup>

However, the United States is also pushing back against efforts to give Ukraine a clear timetable to NATO membership. "The US is instead urging allies to stay focused on short-term military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, in order to help it resist and eventually repel Russia's invasion. Practical support such as ammunition deliveries should be the main priority for Vilnius, US officials said, with discussions over a potential postwar political relationship only distracting from that goal."<sup>112</sup> While this could be due to the realist narrative that NATO expansion is to blame for Russia's invasion,<sup>113</sup> Washington seems to be more concerned with the narrative from Moscow, with a deepening of ties with Ukraine in the short-term being potential fuel for Putin's rhetoric of the fight being between Russia and NATO, and therefore a means of escalation. In the meantime, "In order for us to get to the question of when and how to get Ukraine into the alliance, we must, as the secretary-general has noted, 'ensure that Ukraine prevails as a sovereign, independent nation', a senior US official said."<sup>114</sup> As such, the liberal argument regarding NATO is a little complex. On one hand, the United States is motivated to

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<sup>111</sup> Biden, J. (2022, May 31). President Biden: What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine. *The New York Times*. [www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html)

<sup>112</sup> Foy, H., & Schwartz, F. (2023, April 6). *US opposes offering Ukraine a road map to Nato membership*. Financial Times. [www.ft.com/content/c37ed22d-e0e4-4b03-972e-c56af8a36d2e](http://www.ft.com/content/c37ed22d-e0e4-4b03-972e-c56af8a36d2e)

<sup>113</sup> Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), 77–89. [www.jstor.org/stable/24483306](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306)

<sup>114</sup> Foy, H., & Schwartz, F. (2023, April 6). *US opposes offering Ukraine a road map to Nato membership*. Financial Times. [www.ft.com/content/c37ed22d-e0e4-4b03-972e-c56af8a36d2e](http://www.ft.com/content/c37ed22d-e0e4-4b03-972e-c56af8a36d2e)

assist Ukraine due to NATO's role of mutually guaranteeing the security of many of its European allies, who are directly or indirectly threatened by the violation of European security as a result of the conflict. On the other hand, the United States does not want to drag NATO itself into the conflict out of fears of escalating it.

From a constructivist perspective, America's reaction can be understood through its ideological commitment to promoting freedom and democracy abroad and its perception of Russia's invasion being a violation of the post-Cold War international norms established by the United States as the hegemonic power. As for the first point, a quote from Biden's aforementioned article in the *New York Times* speaks directly to the American mindset regarding Ukrainian freedom. "Americans will stay the course with the Ukrainian people because we understand that freedom is not free. That's what we have always done whenever the enemies of freedom seek to bully and oppress innocent people, and it is what we are doing now."<sup>115</sup> Many Americans see the United States as a beacon of democracy and freedom, and believe that it has a responsibility to share these values with the rest of the world. They see democracy and freedom as universal values that can help to promote peace and stability, and believe that promoting them abroad is in the national interest. However, there is sometimes a problematic nature of promoting these values as a form of imperialism. "The irony of both the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq is that although in later years they were depicted as plots to promote democracy and therefore as prime examples of the dangers of the more expansive definition of U.S. interests."<sup>116</sup> This transitions well into the core value of the American public and why it gets invested in conflicts abroad, in that what qualifies as an American "interest" does not fit in with common

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<sup>115</sup> Biden, J. (2022, May 31). President Biden: What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine. *The New York Times*. [www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html)

<sup>116</sup> Kagan, R. (2023, January). A Free World, If You Can Keep It. *Foreign Affairs*, 102(1), 39-53. p. 48

realist perception of what a state's interest is. Americans view the United States as a champion of democracy and human rights, and within its right to intervene when America sees fit in order to protect those values. However, "when America sees fit" is not at all a consistent measurement. As Robert Kagan put it: "Today, [Americans] have been roused again to defend the liberal world. It would be better if they had been roused earlier. Putin spent years probing to see what the Americans would tolerate, first in Georgia in 2008, then in Crimea in 2014..."<sup>117</sup>

For the constructivist argument regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine being a violation of the international system created by the United States following the end of the Cold War, this argument is predicated on the American desire to reinforce and uphold the norms and ideas that had been established. "With the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and disintegration of the Soviet Union, the bipolar international system dominating the Cold War period disappeared, leaving its place to basically a unipolar system under the leadership of the United States."<sup>118</sup> At the heart of this new world order was the idea of liberal internationalism. This approach emphasized the promotion of democracy, human rights, and free markets as the best way to ensure peace and stability in the international system. The United States believed that by promoting these values, it could create a more peaceful and prosperous world. Thus, Russia's invasion of Ukraine violated two of these central tenets that the US valued, Ukrainian democracy and human rights. Therefore, in order to maintain a commitment to these values abroad, the United States was put into a position where it "had" to act.

The United States' reaction, while having prominent incentives originating from each theory, seems to be best described by constructivism's notion of America's commitment to the

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52

<sup>118</sup> Yilmaz, M. (2008, Winter). "The New World Order": An Outline of the Post-Cold War Era. *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 7(44-58), 39-53.

promotion and protection of democracy and freedom abroad, along with the partially realist partially liberal nature of its want to maintain a balance of power in Eastern Europe that both benefits itself as well as its allies and NATO. Echoing all of these sentiments at once, President Biden wrote that “Standing by Ukraine in its hour of need is not just the right thing to do. It is in our vital national interests to ensure a peaceful and stable Europe and to make it clear that might does not make right.”<sup>119</sup>

### **A Broad Review of the Theoretical Explanations**

After looking at each one of these case studies, it is abundantly clear that each theory of international relations has an explanatory role in describing how states reacted to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, the explanatory value of each theory varies between each case, with realism better explaining Germany’s hesitancy from an energy interdependence standpoint but not being as useful in describing the lower levels of military aid from France. However, the underlying strand of continuity between each case, and the best theoretical approach for broadly discussing countries’ reactions to the conflict in Ukraine, is the centrality of a constructivist position in each country’s reaction. For France, it is its identity as a “balancing power” in diplomacy. For Germany, it is the legacy and history of *Ostpolitik* impacting public opinion on how the country should interact with Russia. For China, it is their *weltanschauung* of being a “new” global power. For the United States, it is the commitment of both the government and the public to maintain and protect freedom and democracy in other countries. The overall lesson then, should one be taken from this, is that a country’s identity and the ideas and history that shape its policy are often paramount or tantamount in their respective decision making regarding a crisis.

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<sup>119</sup> Biden, J. (2022, May 31). President Biden: What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine. *The New York Times*. [www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html)

## **Conclusion**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022 was the culmination of just under a years' worth of direct escalation, leading to a conflict that is still ongoing today. Russia views Ukraine as an important piece to a supranational conception of its own nationalism, and its drifting towards Western influence not only qualifies as a potential security threat, but an affront to this shared history at the core of Russia's national mythology. In response to Russia's invasion, countries around the world responded in unique ways influenced by differing factors, perceived differently through the lenses of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. However, constructivism provides the best general insight into what influences a country's reaction. Thus, looking into the future, changes in how a country reacts to developments in the conflict will more than likely be tied to the evolving ideas and norms in our international system. Whatever the conclusion may be, we can only hope, for the sake of the Ukrainian people, that it comes sooner rather than later.



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