

Vladimir Putin: Illogical Madman or Rational Decision Maker?

Understanding Putin's Logic Regarding the Incursion into Ukraine

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Abstract

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has garnered much attention for not only the prospects of a renewed Cold War between the West and Russia as well as the plight of the Ukrainians trying to stave off the invasion, but also in seeking to understand the "logic" behind Russian president Vladimir Putin's decision to invade and whether or not he is exhibiting signs of mental illness. The truth of the matter is that Putin's decision to invade Ukraine has been logical and rational given the circumstances present and how Putin and his governing team perceives the current situation based on the past history of Russian/Western relations, Russia's historical past, and the current Russian National Idea drawn up and built by Putin himself. This work aims to place Putin's logic on his decision to invade Ukraine based on a well-known economic theory placed into an international relations context, Rational Choice Theory, and seeks to reveal those elements throughout Russia's long and often turbulent, warlike 1000-year history as well as current constructs and actions of both post-Soviet Russia and the myopic views of Western nations that have guided Russia and Putin to establish the rationales and logic to invade Ukraine to protect its own security at home and in the near-abroad of Russia's established sphere of influence. In the end, Western countries may have to re-examine our own logic in how they have dealt with NATO expansion in Europe in the post-Soviet Period which could have averted the conflict the West has with Russia today.

Keywords: Rational Choice, Ukraine, NATO, Russia, Putin

Introduction

For many in the United States who read and understand their news on the Russia/Ukraine war from an American perspective, it is not hard for to them to find such headlines as “Putin’s War Looks Increasingly Insane (Levitz, 2022), “The Crazy Logic of Brinksmanship Is Back” (Traub, 2022), “‘I Personally Think He’s Unhinged’: Analysts Question Putin’s Mental State After Ukraine Invasion” (Bidgood, 2022), and “Perhaps Putin thinks acting crazy is a good strategy” (McManus, 2022). Indeed, for many Americans whose only source of information about Russia, its president Vladimir Putin, and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine which comes from such outlets often only know half of the story and very often, a myopic view of Russia and its president due to the paradigm blindness that pervades American foreign policy and public perceptions about Russia. This paradigm blindness not only paints an inaccurate view of Russia and her people but also of Putin who is seen as a mentally ill leader that lacks any logic for his actions and appears to be invading former Soviet republics in an effort to recreate a “new” Soviet Union. What the Western media and the people who consume it does not see is that Putin’s actions are rather rational and are what any leader of a nation would do otherwise to maintain the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the nation they lead, including leaders of the United States. This work seeks to find the essence of Putin’s logic and how Russia’s rich historical past, Russian/Western relations, Western actions under the guise of NATO and Putin’s own efforts to remake Russia into a respectable world power have contributed to create the current circumstances in which Putin has rationally and logically chosen to move against Ukraine to protect Russia’s interests in her region and in the geopolitical arena.

Rational Choice Theory constructs

To understand Putin and the geopolitical moves made by Russia concerning its confrontation with the West, NATO, and the U.S. over Ukraine, it is beneficial to have a concept of an economic theory that is often used in other academic disciplines to explain decisions made by people that are thought to be irrational but are often not, Rational Choice Theory. Decisions made by leaders of nations are rarely, if ever, made in a vacuum absent any external variables or

influences. The political scientist and jurist Hans Morgenthau noted that in political thought, two main camps exist, classical idealism and realism (Novelli, 2018). In classical idealism, global order is thought to be made through a leader's rational decisions that would fall in place with decisions made by other rational actors to create a coherent mosaic of a global peace (with some minor disagreements along the way). Such a construct would need to have each leader possess a type of innate decision-making rationale from which to draw their decisions from and from which all other leaders draw their "rational" decisions from the same pool. The result would be a peaceful world order that quoting Morgenthau "can be achieved (in the) here and now" (Novelli, p. 117). This idyllic global order based on uniform, innate decision making however is better found in the pages of More or Hilton than in the pages of history. It is the second camp that Morgenthau describes that appears to fit better and constructs a political paradigm that leaders and rulers operate from, that being *realism*. Novelli (2018) points out realism, quoting Morgenthau, exists in,

*a world of opposing interests and of
conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully
realized, but must at best be approximated through the ever
temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious
settlement of conflicts (Morgenthau, 1997, p. 3)." (Novelli, p. 118)*

Given that sovereign states and their leaders see situations from different perspectives, the premise of classical idealism where all decisions are rational, uniform, and drawn out of the same pool for the common good just does not fit in this real world construct; thus, the world of realism, based on actions made in an anarchial environment where decisions are made in the best interest of the state making that decision and all other considerations (regarding other states' interests and needs) are often ignored, is the better concept from which to apply rational choices made. Much of the consideration and decision making in the realist perspective of international relations is based on state security and survival in this Darwinian and anarchial world. Governing regimes of nations must make decisions given the circumstances and situations they are currently facing; however, those not privy to the rationales of the state and are merely observers on the sideline often try to put the decisions of these states operating in a realist

perspective in a framework of classical idealism and “see the irrationality” of decisions made by states like Russia and leaders like Putin without any consideration of the situation Putin and his team sees himself and his country in. The West, as a result, sees Putin as irrational in his decision to invade Ukraine and is considered the bully of the global schoolyard.

The foundations laid here on realism in international relations and decision making in geopolitics lends itself to the Rational Choice Theory concept mentioned above. An economic construct to help describe how individuals make decisions based on maximum utility of the resources they have at their disposal and can afford to use to confront a dilemma or situation, Rational Choice Theory can be applied in international relations to describe how states achieve their goals given the current constraints and opportunities from which they find themselves in. The decision makers (often the state leader) will make such rational decisions that seek to optimize the best outcome and utility. As Novelli (2018) notes, this utility described in the context of international relations, “can be translated as national security” (p. 122). Given the anarchic nature of the world in which the realist operates however also means that there will be wins and losses, gains and concessions and that the decision maker will not often get everything he or she seeks (Scott, 2000). Thus, decisions made through the lens of Rational Choice Theory describe that these decisions are indeed rational in that they seek to find a means to an end (Novelli, 2018), (Scott, 2000) that not only maximizes and provides for the best outcome but also what is “affordable”, that is, what will not destroy the state in its aims and objectives.

Putin’s “Logic”

The world in which Putin sees himself and Russia in is based on a 1300 year-old canvas of Russian history whose surface has been painted upon by past Russians that have gone before him as well as external actors like the Mongols in the 13th century, Napoleonic France in the early 19th century, Nazi Germany in the mid-20th century and the United States and the West with which existed an ideological Cold War that though did not result very often in direct confrontation, existed on the playing fields of proxy wars from the mid-20th century up to the fall of the Soviet Union (McNeil, 2022). There have also been other external contributors to the historical canvas of Russia and much of it has existed on the battlefield. McNeil (2022), in an interview with Greg Carleton, a professor of Russian Studies at Tufts University, suggests that

militarization and warfare is part of the Russian DNA and possibly rightfully so “for its own survival.” Apart from its defense of the borders and defense of its people and culture from foreign invaders, Russia was also an imperialist state that expanded from its origins of the Kievan Rus on the steppes of the Black and Caspian Seas and later the Grand Duchy of Moscow to its first noted expansion beginning with the Russo-Khazan Wars in 1552. Over time, the Tsars, Emperors, and Soviet Premiers sought to not only find opportunities to expand further but at the same time had to also protect their existing holdings and interests. Even with the loss of its former Soviet republics with the collapse of the USSR, Russia today still is the largest country by land mass, nearly doubling that of Canada, the United States, and China individually. Russia shares its border with 14 other nations, some former Soviet republics with which it shares friendly bilateral relations with and are collective member partners of economic and security agreements, while at the same time five of its border neighbors are NATO members, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Norway (NATO, 2022) totaling 754 miles of shared border with these Atlantic Alliance Countries (Anglesey, 2022). NATO’s efforts to admit Ukraine would add on another 1,226 miles (Europe Without Barriers, 2018) to an already contentious border that has been fraught with misunderstandings and broken assurances between the U.S. and its Western allies in Europe (with Finland mulling NATO admission, the NATO/Russian border would add just over an additional 800 miles).

When Putin assumed the presidency of Russia after the resignation of Boris Yeltsin on December 31, 1999, more than a new millennium was just breaching over the horizon; a new Russia was being born. Weeks before, Putin published a piece in the independent Russian newspaper *Novaya gazeta* that laid out the approaches that Russia should take to address the decade long driftlessness of the country after the fall of the Soviet Union (Willerton *et al*, 2021). The content of the article would later be the foundations of Putin’s Russian National Idea concept that allowed the country to rise from the rubble of a nation with no identity and guidance to one with a purpose that reflected the legacies of great Russian eras that altered the course of history. While not completely denying and disowning both Russia’s imperialist and communist past, Putin retained some elements of these eras that allowed the nation to regain its nationalist pride, rich heritage, and a rejuvenated force in the region which it once held sway over. That rich history of Russia’s past held not only the foundations of the “logic” that Putin has applied in dealing with NATO, the U.S., and the West as well as the ongoing situation in Ukraine, but also

the seemingly rational war culture that has accompanied Russia from its first conquests and defenses of the homeland throughout its history.

Ukraine has held an important place in the Russian National Idea. Apart from being considered a close Slavic ethnic group, the area of Ukraine has long held to be the genesis of Russia and its people beginning with the near-mythic peoples of the Keivan Rus, considered to be the ancestors of today's Russian people. Ukraine was also important economically and politically in that it has often been known to be the "breadbasket" of the former Soviet Union, akin to the U.S. region of the Midwest. Politically, both during and after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine served as a buffer region along with other past Warsaw Pact nations that insulated Soviet Moscow from Western Europe and U.S.-led NATO. Today's Ukrainian borders have been shaped not by ethnic Ukrainians' own design on ancient borders but rather through Russian (both imperial and Soviet eras) designs. Ukraine, throughout Russian control, was partitioned and added to over the centuries. Willerton (2022c) noted that today's "modern Ukraine (its borders) was entirely created by Russia" after the 1917 Revolution. Soviet leaders had no scruples on shaping the region without considering the ethnic peoples who lived there. For communist Russia, they were all Russian for state purposes despite having distinctive ethnicities in those republics under Soviet control. Two salient events in the 20th century regarding Ukraine and the residual effects it has caused in today's conflict is Stalin's repopulation efforts of ethnic Russians in Ukraine after what is generally known in Ukrainian history as the Holodomor, the terror-famine in 1932-33 that resulted in the deaths of nearly 3.9 million Ukrainians (Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota, n.d), and the transfer of Crimea and the city Sevastopol by Premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Putin, 2022). Upon independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine's "Russian-made" borders now held ethnic Russians in the South and East of the country where the main agricultural region historically has existed, the Russian Breadbasket, (World Data Center, n.d), and ethnic Russians living in Crimea and Sevastopol, the city that harbored the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet, who now found themselves on the wrong side of the Russian border.

Putin, after establishing the first three Pillars of his Russian National Idea (a strong centralized state, a functioning market economy connected with the global commons, and a re-

established social welfare system [Willerton *et al*, 2021]) was able to exert its influence once again beyond its borders and claim its role as the defender of ethnic Slavs, the Russian Orthodox Church, and what Blakkisrud (2022) notes as the “Russian civilization.” This blueprint for Russian assertion back into global geopolitics was not concealed by Putin by any means. In fact, prior to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, in 2007 Putin delivered a speech to a room of mainly Western world leaders, ministers, and diplomats, declaring Russia’s new efforts at being recognized as a global power once again and reasserting its influence in its own regional backyard. After years of seeking to engage the West and NATO to ensure global security *for all* and not just the West, Russia became weary of voicing its own security concerns on deaf ears and reminded Western leaders of the broken promises of assurances that were made upon the reunification of Germany that NATO would not expand eastward “not one inch” (Matlock, 2022).

Putin’s remarks in Munich were once again unheeded and in 2008, NATO leaders met in Bucharest, Romania which among the topics discussed was yet another round of NATO enlargement to include Ukraine and Georgia. Despite the Bush Administration’s support in including the two nations into the NATO fold, some members led by France and Germany were not so keen on the idea believing that such admission would “unduly antagonize Russia” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 2). The French and German contingent ended up winning the day for not allowing the formal membership process to begin, but not before making a statement that Ukraine and Georgia *will become members of NATO* (emphasis added) (Mearsheimer, 2014). Observers in Moscow were not impressed nor reassured, they had heard of such promises and assurances from Western and NATO leaders in the past and were not about to commit themselves into a “wait-and-see” holding pattern to see what NATO’s next moves were going to be. Moscow made a bold statement in the invasion of Georgia in seeking to protect the Russian-leaning populations in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia and to later recognize these two as autonomous republics no longer officially a part of Georgia. With the Georgian invasion Mearsheimer notes, “Moscow had made its point” (p. 2). As a result, NATO sought new members for the Atlantic Alliance elsewhere on the European continent a little further from Russia’s borders, but it had not forgot about Ukraine; it just needed a window of opportunity to open up. That opportunity came in 2014 during the Maidan Protests when pro-Russian president

Viktor Yanukovich had originally accepted an EU-backed economic package only to renege on it after a Russian counteroffer had been made and Yanukovich turned toward Moscow. Western leaning Ukrainians began demonstrations and protesting in Maidan Square in Kyiv. The next day Yanukovich fled to Russia amid the protests and leaving a vacated presidential seat for the taking, a pro-Western government was installed to lead Ukraine. Ukrainians in the center and western part of the country as well as Western leaders lauded the ouster as a show of democracy allowing the voice of the Ukrainian people to be heard. Moscow and Putin thought otherwise, they viewed the ouster as a Western-supported coup (Matlock 2022). Ethnic Russians in the Donbas region and Crimea were also not so enthusiastic about the pro-Western assumption of leadership after the Maidan protests. Separatists began their own protests and Kyiv responded with an “anti-terrorist operation” to root out these troublemakers (Cohen, 2014b). These operations led to a number of ethnic Russians fearing for their safety and eventually sought refuge across the border into Russia. Moscow seen these activities as a type of “Western social engineering” (Mearsheimer, p. 2) designed to eradicate any pro-Russian influences in the country so that a seamless move toward NATO membership would be met unopposed. However, Russia and Putin, still had a say so about what Ukraine’s geopolitical future would look like. Faced with the fear of NATO bases on their back doorstep, Putin opted to make the first move and annexed Crimea and Sevastopol, two Russian bastions on the Black Sea and integral for Russia’s security on its southwestern flank.

The 2014 war produced no clear winner. The Minsk II agreements produced at best a fragile peace with Russia not fully realizing their goals in Ukraine, leaving ethnic Russian separatists dangerously exposed and harassed by a Western-backed Kyiv government. Ukraine lost Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia. For both parties, this was not an outcome both desired.

NATO and the West Do Not Walk Blameless in This

Western perceptions of Russia have failed to shed the old stereotypes of a mysterious enemy that often did not show its cards and was seen as an oppressive, authoritarian state where liberal freedoms were only dreamt of. But even in Soviet times, Russian efforts at Western engagement could be found. Gorbachev sought a “New Thinking” approach with the West

(Tsygankov, 202). Under Boris Yeltsin, efforts at Western engagement accelerated to the point that Russia appeared to be *too* overbearing to be accepted, leading Western leaders to be hesitant and suspicious of Russia's intentions. Even Putin sought efforts at engagement through his "pragmatic cooperation" approach (Tsygankov, 2022) but such efforts over the past 30 years have fallen short of Russian expectations. Willerton (2021) notes that "hostility to Russia is the oldest continuous foreign-policy tradition in the United States. Even Alexis de Tocqueville made similar observations predicting their rivalry as far back as the first half of the 19th century (Willerton, 2021). Even today Americans still have a hard time shedding the old stereotypes of Russia which is even more pronounced with the foreign policy stance of Putin and his team have followed. Much of this distrust and failure to shed old perceptions have been perpetuated by the Western, and in particular American, media that portrays today's Russia as a revanchist, aggressive state with a leader in Vladimir Putin as longing for the old Soviet system and with it the lands once held by the Soviet Union. Some of this narrative is true. Putin and a great number of Russians today that were alive during the Soviet period found great sadness and tragedy at the fall of the USSR. And although Putin has stated that the "greatest tragedy of the 20th century was the demise of the Soviet Union" (Willerton, 2022b), he also notes that to revive such a republic would be a grave mistake for not only the world but also for the Russian people. But Putin inherited a rudderless state drifting in a geopolitical sea with no direction and no identity. As what any leader would do to guide their country to respectability and prominence, Putin embarked on his plan to make this a realization. He strengthened and centralized the governance of the state, pushed nationalists and liberals to the political fringe (but not without co-opting some of their ideas into his own plan), and strengthened the economy by exploiting global market controls on resources Russia is rich in to fill the treasury coffers and provide for the well-being of his polity. But such efforts were seen different by the West. Putin's domestic realities have, according to Willerton (2021), been distorted into "misleading characterizations and interpretations of Russian reality (p. 4) fueled by sugary American media that fuels such content. Tsygankov (2016) notes that American media has consistently created an anti-Russian narrative that has resurfaced after Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine. Russia's foreign policy actions serves as fodder for American media to twist such actions as an example of Russia "fitting within its old pattern" Tsygankov (2016, p. 2) and how Russia is not distancing itself from its sinister past but how it is becoming more Soviet-like

once again in its domestic policy. As it pertains to Russia's foreign policy, American media finds narratives and examples of Russia's militarized past as described by Greg Carleton (McNeil, 2022) earlier in this work to show that post-Soviet Russia has consistently shown that it "presents a threat to the international community of democratic states and, as such, must be confronted by the West" (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 5). Cohen (2014a) has noted that even "respected" media sources like the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* participates in "Putin bashing" and questions his logic and rationality while failing to provide any objective analysis of Russia's foreign policy and often providing only half of the story. Instead, Americans who read and digest this half-chewed material believe that *all* of Ukraine is Western-leaning and seek to remove themselves under Russia's sphere of influence while in reality there is a sizeable ethnic Russian population in the south and east of Ukraine that is more pro-Russian and that the taproot of the Russian discontent is NATO expansion that began in the 1990s (Mearsheimer, 2014), (Cohen, 2014b). In addition, Tsygankov (2016), Cohen (2014b), and Willerton (2021) notes that anti-Russian narratives not only serve to fuel anti-Russian sentiment among the American population, but it also may drive official U.S. foreign policy toward Russia especially when Russia's actions counter U.S. activity in similar areas of interest as in the case of Ukraine.

Such an anti-Russian perspective in the West lends itself to the notion that quite possibly according to Willerton (2016) that the Cold War never really ended; that in reality Russia themselves opted to do a geopolitical, ideological makeover that for a time had to redefine itself and its course in global affairs but never really lost its status as a global superpower and an alternative to the U.S. unipolar world order. What was needed was Putin's blueprint for the Russian National Idea which provided the thrust needed to reseat themselves squarely in the geopolitical arena and in its former sphere of influence. Willerton (2016) has noted that Russians "see themselves as natural leaders in Eurasia" (p. 4) a position they have held for centuries and have no plan of relinquishing that role to the West, the U.S. or to NATO. As a result of claiming that sphere of influence in Eurasia, Russia has a legitimate right to have its security rights respected and to be the defenders of Slavic peoples, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian civilization. Just because the Soviet Union dissolved did not mean that the Russian people gave up these centuries-old obligations and rights; the "leadership and sphere of

influence expectations are central to the post-Soviet Russian “‘sense of honor’ and ‘national idea’” (Willerton, 2016, p. 4).

Western efforts to enact a new containment policy in Eastern Europe and Eurasia of Russian influence is noted in American diplomatic thought. Michael McFaul, who briefly served as the United States Ambassador to Russia during the Obama administration is one such diplomat that sought to sow anti-Russian sentiment through Russia’s foreign policy activity in 2014 when Russia annexed Ukraine after the Maidan protests and eventual ouster of Yanukovich. Calling Russia’s annexation as the singular event that “ended the post-Cold War era in Europe” (McFaul, 2014a) McFaul called for the West to strengthen Ukraine (McFaul, 2014), goading Western nations and politicians in the U.S. to support Ukraine’s fight against Putin who according to McFaul is quickly losing popularity amongst the Russian people due to his authoritarian domestic policies and his “nostalgia...(and) yearning for the old order and a resentment of the terms of the Cold War’s end (McFaul, 2014a, p. 1) Such narratives only serve to propel the anti-Russia sentiment that Russia is a rising power who was once “destroyed” and now seeks a rematch with the West. But McFaul does appear to commit a Freudian slip in one of his 2014 op-eds in the *New York Times*. While drumming up the war effort against Russia, McFaul also calls for Western leaders to “encourage Kiev to reduce civilian casualties through safer humanitarian corridors to allow civilians to flee the war zone” (2014b). What McFaul does not explicitly clarify is which civilian casualties he is talking about – the Russian separatists and ethnic Russian Ukrainians who had been known to flee across the border into Russia to escape the violence or ethnic Ukrainians? In the same piece he also acknowledges that Ukraine could afford to be a little more conciliatory toward the ethnic Russians to diffuse the unrest in the east of the country suggesting that their policies toward ethnic Russians are oppressive and supporting Cohen’s claims that the Western-backed Kyiv regime is committing atrocities on its own Ukrainian population that are ethnic Russian, which thus provides the rationale and justification for Putin to act upon the 4th Pillar of the Russian National Idea as its return as *the* Eurasian hegemon (Willerton, *et al*, 2021) and defining a Russian civilization that transcends other sovereign states’ borders (Blakkisrud, 2022).

But not every Western diplomat, pundit, and expert on Russia/Western relations is fooled by the anti-Russian sentiment. Countering McFaul's rhetoric of encouraging the West to arm Ukraine to repel Russian aggression, Walt (2015) argues that arming Ukraine by the West only serves to escalate the conflict. Thinking that arming Ukraine and conducting joint NATO exercises within and near Ukraine serves as a deterrence in international relations thought is actually a classic example of a spiral model of escalation, the exact opposite of what the West is claiming to do to diffuse the volatile situation in Ukraine. Russia's actions on Ukraine are a result of fear of its own security on its borders of a power rival (NATO) and the encroachment of that rival on Russia's sphere of influence. Ukraine, like it or not, resides in that Russian sphere. Both Walt (2015) and Mearsheimer (2014) note that Russia is not the juggernaut, bogeyman revanchist power that the West makes it out to be. Russia has acknowledged the U.S. as a superpower, a leader in international structures, and a heavy influencer in global affairs...but they refuse to acknowledge that the U.S. is *the only superpower* and that they, as well as all other countries in the global system, should not simply go along with what the U.S. says or does as there are other alternatives out there; Russia is seeking to be that alternative in Eurasia.

Fixing the Problem

Putin's logic in its incursion into Ukraine need not be a cryptologic task in to figuring out why Putin made the decisions he made. For the past 20-plus years Russia, under Putin's leadership, produced what appears to be voluminous evidence in the form of statecraft through published, open-source documents entailing domestic and foreign policy, speeches, and statecraft emanating from Russia. If one looks at it from this perspective, the West is to really foot much of the blame for failing to see the signs which ultimately erroneously directed Western nations' foreign policy, U.S. foreign policy and NATO's expansion policy. United States foreign policy guidance has been seriously misdirected due to both hubris and ignorance of looking at Russia's actions of ensuring security along its borders as something every other leader of state, whether in a defensive alliance or not, would have done for their country. Willerton (2022) notes that the Monroe Doctrine dictated to the rest of the world that meddling in the Western Hemisphere will not be tolerated by the United States; that America will be the sole power to determine what goes on in its sphere of influence. Before that, the United Kingdom did the same, and before them other colonial powers such as Spain and Portugal. Imperial Russia also once held sway over

Eurasia. So, it does not come as a surprise that Russia is seeking security in its own region from external threats as it is today.

In his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Putin made it known of Russia's security concerns and the troubling activity and expansion of NATO on the European continent to which he asked NATO leaders, "against whom is this expansion intended?" (Putin, 2007). Apparently not satisfied with the response of NATO, the West, and even the UN on security matters salient to Russia, Putin embarked on its own course of foreign policy and national security strategy in revised documents that have adapted to domestic and foreign circumstances, while the West has relied on the old paradigms that has guided it through the Cold War and has failed to revise itself. In its National Security Strategy to 2020 (2009), Article 17 plainly shows Russia's intentions and logic of its own security and NATO's encroachment of it in that,

"A determining aspect of relations with NATO remains the fact that plans to extend the alliance's military infrastructure to Russia's borders...are unacceptable to Russia." (Further,) "Russia is prepared to develop relations with NATO on the basis of equality and in the interests of strengthening the general security of the Euro-Atlantic region. The content and depth of these relations will be determined by the preparedness of the alliance to recognise Russia's legal interests when engaging in military-political planning"

Pike (2022) has noted that Russia's military doctrine had been updated in 2021 to reflect the current conditions. Past strategies called for fostering a working relationship with NATO and the west to relieve security concerns for Russia. The tone is more ominous, however, in the 2021 document citing that,

"NATO's military buildup (is) a threat to Russia... (and that) Moscow will continue pursuing...undermining the U.S.-led liberal international order, dividing Western political and security institutions...seeks to capitalize on perceptions of U.S. retrenchment and power vacuums, which it views the United States is unwilling or unable to fill, by pursuing relatively low-cost options, including influence campaigns, cybertools, and limited military interventions" (Pike, p. 1)

In effect, the writing was on the wall. Putin, throughout his presidency laid out his logic on Ukraine and why Ukraine is strategically more important to Russia than it is for NATO and the West. Even to his benefit, Putin has exhibited much restraint on the growing NATO threat in Ukraine. Cohen (2014b) notes that in 2014 Putin was hesitant to anything more than annexing Crimea and Sevastopol to the chagrin of his countrymen. Some felt that he was betraying “not just [Donetsk and Luhansk] but himself, Russia, and all of us” (Cohen, 2014b, p. 15) leading to the question “is Russia abandoning the Donbas? (p. 15). To maintain popular support Putin needed to do more. The final straw came in December 2021 when his team proposed and delivered a draft to NATO leaders drawing out security demands and assurances that generally declare that the parties to the agreement “shall not strengthen their security individually, within international organizations, military alliances or coalitions at the expense of the security of other Parties” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Western and NATO leaders summarily dismissed this proposal as unacceptable and given the circumstances viewed from a realist paradigm, Putin thus made the rational logic to make the first move into Ukraine to preserve its sovereignty, territorial integrity, security, and to fulfill and preserve its aspirations drawn out in the Russian National Idea constructed by him. As a result, West now is scrambling and finger-pointing on a matter that was in essence started by and maintained by them.

Walt (2015), Cohen (2014b), and Mearsheimer (2014) among others have advocated that the U.S. and NATO abandon its efforts to bring Ukraine into the Atlantic Alliance; the West merely wants a new member equivalent to a “Peeping Tom” of sorts that can easily peer over the shared Ukrainian/Russian border and place its hardware to what they think is deterring Russia to not get too bold in its former sphere. Russia however wants to preserve not only its formerly mentioned sphere of influence but also sees NATO expansion as an existential threat, its fear that its once proud (though often turbulent) hundreds of years of history is not annihilated and only mentioned in textbooks as a once-proud people who were summarily defeated and no more.

Conclusion

Walt (2015) notes that “open-ended NATO expansion has done more to poison relations with Russia than any other single Western policy” (p. 2) Since the fall of the Soviet Union,

Russian and its leaders have for 30 years vehemently objected to NATO expansion eastward toward Russia's borders while all the while getting only verbal assurances that have been shown time and again to be empty promises as evidenced through multiple waves of NATO additions. Russia has sought to engage the West throughout while at the same time finding its identity and bearings as to who it wants to be and what place it is choosing to take in the global order. While amassing power and influence under no hidden veil, the West has finally taken notice and has used its *defensive* military alliance in the form of NATO to antagonize and threaten Russia in its own backyard. Simple logic would reveal to anyone that such a demonstration of potential force would arouse concern and fear especially when Russia has sought to engage the Western global establishment to be a partner in fighting security threats that they have in common and joining forces and solving problems that threatens humanity as a whole. The West unfortunately has continued to operate out of paradigm blindness, refusing to look at the current situation in its current context. Russia does not seek to become a revanchist, imperial, authoritarian, land-grabbing threat. It merely seeks to establish itself as a global power that has established its new identity as a responsible party in global affairs and to reserve its interests as the protector of the Slavic people, the Russian Orthodox Faith, and a Russian civilization that resides in its sphere of influence though at times outside its own borders. It sees NATO expansion, particularly in Ukraine, the cradle of the Russian people today, as an existential threat.

It has been argued here through the circumstances that Putin has faced while leading Russia throughout the 21st century that his "logic" and subsequent actions regarding Ukraine is not based on the whims of a mentally ill madman but on rational choice based entirely on the circumstances in which Putin and Russia find themselves in. Given the current state of affairs in Ukraine, Willerton may be right, the Cold War may have never ended, it merely sat dormant for 30 years; but the seismic activity of NATO may break open a rift of such magnitude that an inevitable eruption will occur and from which no return will be made if all parties (NATO included) does not apply rational logic and see the canvas for what it truly is.

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