(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

An analytical study of Russia-Ukraine war in reference to the offensive realist approach in international relations

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Abstract

During the cold war, there had been deepened geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West—tension between the Soviet Union and the United States and their respective allies, which resulted in the decline of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and in creating a unipolar world. The decline of the USSR was believed to be the disintegration of Russia. Since then, Russia had come in a defensive mode but since the 2000s it was looking for an opportunity in a diplomatic way and it got that opportunity when the West proposed to integrate Russia's border country—Ukraine with it. So, the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine again seemed an arena of resurgent geopolitical rivalry between major powers of the world. Prolong conflict between Russia-Ukraine over geography, identity, and power revisionism has recently led Russia to adopt offensive posturing in a manner that satisfies the conceptual ground of offensive realism to negate the possibility of harbouring a neighbour who may possibly disrupt the balance of power and may entrench a ditch in the world to make a bipolar world again in which Russian supremacy is likely to prevail. The term propounded by John Mearsheimer—offensive realism highlights a character in which great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony, which abolishes the possibility of a threat by another great power. The current study attempts to scrutinize the events in the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war drawing inferences from Offensive Realism, for which a descriptive and analytical approach has been adopted.

Keywords: Conflict; European Union; Insecurity; NATO; Russia; Soviet Union; Threat; Western Countries

1   Introduction

The Great Peloponnesian War was a conflict between Athens and Sparta—the two leading ancient Greek city—states and their respective allies, which provided many approaches to understanding and interpreting the international relations. In this mega event, Sparta was the leader of an alliance of independent states that incorporated most of the major land powers of the Peloponnese and central Greece, as well as Corinth as a sea power. Thus, the Athenians had owned the stronger navy and the Spartans had the stronger army. The event led to renewed hostilities when Athens allied itself with Corcyra, a strategically significant colony of Corinth while Corinth was a faithful ally for Sparta. Fighting continued, and the Athenians then took steps that explicitly violated the Thirty Years' Treaty which occurred between Athens and Sparta. Sparta and its allies accused Athens of aggression and threatened war, and then Peloponnesian War outbroke. War stretched to an entire region thus leading to the entry of Athens into Sparta which eventually resulted in the decline of the power of, a regional hegemonic state, Sparta [1] [2].

The existing narratives reflect the present situation of Ukraine which happens to be trapped in a war orchestrated by oscillating power differentials in the post-cold War world where the war in the words of John Joseph Mearsheimer, "is now used as a legitimate instrument of statecraft and security maximization" [3]. Ukraine, a country in the eastern hemisphere of Europe, which earlier was the part of Soviet Union till 1991 is split between two co-rival centers of power

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and now faces the brunt of war. Ukraine has been facing a crisis of identity in the face of national sovereignty since the early 2000s which led to different uprisings such as *Dignity Revolution* or *Euromaidan Revolution,* and later on the *Orange Revolution.* Euromaidan, the protest movement, which happened in Ukraine in November 2013, was revealed when President Yanukovych unilaterally delayed the signing of the European Union Association Agreement. Thus, it was the unexpected policy shift from Pro-European to Pro-Russian by the Ukraine government that drove thousands of agitators to go out onto the streets. Wynnyckyj (who was a participant in the protests held on Kyiv's main square, the Maidan) prefers the term "Maidan" to "Euromaidan," and it has been later proposed that the protest movement was for having Ukraine sign on the European Union's Association Agreement, and from December 2013 onward this was a revolution to overthrow Yanukovych so it should be called as Euromaidan Revolution, because former President Victor Yanukovych's refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) triggered the so-called Euromaidan [4]. It is also known as the *Revolution of Dignity* which became the most important event of the Ukrainian state-building process, which is also associated with contemporary national identity during Ukraine's independence. As an outcome of the revolution, thousands of Ukrainian citizens have started to feel proud of their nationality. Therefore, with intervening in Ukraine by Russia this became the question of Ukrainians' dignity. In 2014, Russia annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea and started arming separatists fuelling conflict in the southeastern part of Ukraine—the Donbas. This aggression made the NATO countries aware that Russia still threatened democracy in Europe. Then, NATO responded by suspending all military and civilian cooperation with Russia and it sent more troops with its members in Eastern Europe to maintain democracy. That is why NATO deployed its forces in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, which remained there till 2021. NATO believes that the requirement for an alliance to defend Europe's democracies is particularly acute in some countries such as the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They were seen as especially vulnerable to Russia's military force as Russia went on to increase its aggression against Ukraine in response to NATO inviting Ukraine to join the same as its ally. Thus, NATO is working as an International Security Assistant Force across the world to maintain democracy while Russia is considering this full episode as NATO's expansion [5].

Starting in 2021, Russia increased its military presence along the border with Ukraine, even from inside Belarus, a neighbouring country. Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, opposed NATO's expansion and asked that Ukraine be prevented from ever joining the military alliance [6]. Moreover, he promoted irredentist opinions and made questions about the existence of Ukraine's legitimacy. Russia recognized the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic as independent entities on February 21, 2022 [7] and after three days on February 24, 2022, a full-scale invasion of Ukraine began by Russia, when Putin declared a "special military operation" there on a television program. Tens of thousands of people have died as a result of the ongoing civil conflict, which has also caused a significant refugee crisis [8]. Russia proclaimed the annexation of key regions of southern and eastern Ukraine. The war continues to date with some parts of Ukraine still under the control of Russian forces, which matches the conceptual characteristics of an offensive realism.

2 Material and Methods

As stated in the introduction, the objective of the current study is to analyze the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war through an offensive realistic approach. To achieve this objective, mostly primary and secondary data material has been studied which includes sources of reputed journals, policy papers, briefing papers, reports, books, e-newspapers websites, etc. The descriptive and analytical method has been adopted to know the different aspects of Russia-Ukraine war through the lens of an offensive realistic approach. From the news related to the Russia-Ukrainian war, it appears that a new cold war has started between Russia and the West (especially the United States) and this whole episode is indicative of offensive realism.

3 Ukraine- A Sandwich between the Two Major Powers

One year ago, there was a situation of tension between Russia and Western countries. The center point was Ukraine and the reason was NATO. On the one side, Ukraine was talking about joining the NATO (The North Atlantic Treaty Organization) group, while Russia was warning that it would not tolerate it at all, while Western countries were openly supporting Ukraine. Citing this as the reason, Russia invaded with military action on Ukraine on February 25, 2022, which is named the Russia-Ukraine War. Since then, the whole world community is being affected by it.

Since the beginning of the war between Russia and Ukraine, where Ukrainian soldiers are fighting with Russian troops on the front, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelenskyy is engaged in keeping the world's attention on this war. After all, what were the major differences between the two countries, due to which the Russian army was forced to go to war? At a *prima facie*, it seems that Russia made an excuse for a defensive mode but it was inclined to the offensive mode of realism.

Before the beginning of the war, Russian President Vladimir Putin denied any plans to invade Ukraine. He had said that this is just a military exercise. In February 2022, the Russian military announced a special military operation in Ukraine [9]. After his announcement, explosions started echoing in other parts of the country including Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. This action occurred after Putin announced the termination of the Minsk peace agreement [10] and the sending of troops to two separatist regions of Ukraine [11]. The reason for sending troops to these areas from the Russian side was told to maintain peace. Thousands of Russian troops were deployed along the border with Ukraine before the war began [12]. Since then, there were speculations of an attack on Ukraine. The United States was also repeatedly asserting that the Russian army could attack Ukraine at any time [13].

Everything was fine till the year 1994. In the same year, signing an agreement, Russia agreed to respect the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine. In fact, Ukraine, once a part of the Soviet Union, has strong ties to Russian society and culture. Russia claims that Ukraine (and Belarus) is part of itself; something that was lost in the process of the collapse of the Soviet Union [14]. There is also a sizeable number of Russian language speakers there [15], but after Russia's attack in 2014, to annex the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, relations between the two countries deteriorated. In the year 2014, the then President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, was considered pro-Russia, had to leave power. After that, Russia attacked Ukraine [16]. Thereafter, Russian President Putin claimed that Ukraine was formed by Communist Russia [17]. Putin believes that the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 was akin to the disintegration of Russia [18]. In this sequence, he described the Russian and Ukrainian people as having the same nationality. Putin also said that the current leaders of Ukraine are conducting an anti-Moscow project [19]. Putin also began to argue that Ukraine was never a full country. Rather, he had declared that Ukraine has become a puppet in the hands of Western countries [20].

Actually, in 2004-2005 mass protests happened which lasted for two months that is known as *Orange Revolution*. It helped in bringing to power pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine, who defeated his rival Viktor Yanukovych in a repeat run-off election. Mr. Yanukovych, who took revenge for his defeat and was elected president in 2010, along with the victory, faced a wave of protests against his rule–in this protest, the orange colour was used as a symbol of revolution against him. The mass demonstrations were triggered by Mr. Yanukovych's government's decision not to sign a wide-ranging association agreement with the European Union, because of pressure from Russia. Since Mr. Yanukovych came into power, Mr. Yushchenko was sent to jail for one year. His trial was widely considered as political by the Western powers and supporters of Yushchenko were called orange revolutionists or electoral revolutionists because the supporters of Yushchenko originally adopted orange as the signifying colour for his election campaign. Later on, the colour gave its name to an entire series of political labels, such as the Oranges for his political camp and its supporters [21]. Wynnyckyj (who was a prominent participant in the protests held on Kyiv's main square, the Maidan) prefers the term "Maidan" to "Euromaidan," and it has been later suggested that the protest movement was merely about having Ukraine sign an Association Agreement with the European Union, and from December 2013 onward this was a revolution aimed at overthrowing Yanukovych so it should be called as Euromaidan Revolution. Former President Victor Yanukovych's refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) triggered that so-called Euromaidan. After 2021, this movement has turned into an identity revolution. Putin said that Ukrainians are of Russian origin, while Ukrainians want to identify themselves as Ukrainians and they feel the dignity to be Ukrainians, due to which this movement is called a revolution of dignity or identity [22].

After this, doubts were raised about Putin's intentions. More bitterness between the two countries increased after Ukraine recognized the separatist region of Donetsk and Luhansk region [23]. Russian President Putin's announcement to recognize these separatist regions as independent regions means that Russia is admitting for the first time that its troops are present in those areas. According to the Minsk agreement, Ukraine was supposed to give special status to those areas, but due to Russia's action, it is hardly possible now. Russia had been preparing an atmosphere for war for a long time by accusing it of genocide in the eastern part of Ukraine. Russia also issued special passports for about seven lakh people in the rebel-held areas [24]. Russia's intention behind this was to justify action on Ukraine on the pretext of protecting its citizens. The closeness of Ukraine with Western countries has been a matter of bothering Russia. Russia wanted Ukraine to keep its distance from NATO and Western countries. Matters worsened when Ukraine showed interest in NATO membership. On the other hand, Russia had also warned NATO to give up its expansionist policy in Eastern Europe. Russia had strongly objected to NATO stopping its military activities in Eastern Europe. If NATO accepts these terms of Russia, then NATO will have to show consent to withdraw its forces from Estonia, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania that were once in the Soviet Union. Moreover, NATO will not be able to deploy its missiles in Poland and Romania. NATO countries are accused by Russia of continuously supplying weapons to Ukraine and the United States is provoking tensions between the two countries.

4   Significance of Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer has become one of the most prominent and leading commentators on the Ukraine war and his realist foundations have been a source of much debate. Since Russia decided to invade Ukraine worldwide media and reputed leading newspapers have all devoted significant column space to him. He has been one of the most candid and successful IR thinkers [25]. His theory of offensive realism seems very crucial to the present scenario (especially for the United States, Russia, and China). This is because of his offensive realism which is based on an assumption that states (especially great powers) are chiefly worried about seeking out how to survive in a world where there is not any authority to protect them from each other and this anarchic (international) system creates powerful motives for states to seek for opportunities to attain power at the expense of rivals [26]. Thus, unlike another prominent thinkers of structural realism and defensive realism, those that believe that states seek security maximization, on the contrary, Mearsheimer believes that a state can ensure its ultimate goal—survival, is by always power maximizing and keeping a hope it can, one day, become the 'hegemon in the (international) system' [26].

Mearsheimer described the nature of offensive realism in his seminal book *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"* – and his other articles [26]. Offensive realism is generally reflected in five foundational assumptions:

First, the international system is anarchic. In this respect, it shows the lack of hierarchy in the international arena. It means that there is no central authority, "no world government" that states could strive to for help in the case of emergency [27]. Second, Great powers are the major players in international politics and each of them possesses some offensive military capacity. It means states are probably dangerous to each other as a threat [26]. Third, States can never know about other states' intentions [26]. This assumption does not reflect the necessity of hostile intentions of the states but emphasizes the danger of uncertainty. Fourth, the primary goal of states is survival. States may have some other objectives but they cannot seek them without securing their own existence. Therefore, survival is more significant than any other motive or goal of the state. And fifth, States are rational actors. This assumption tries to claim that states think strategically and do any activity rationally and intentionally in their best interest [28].

Mearsheimer stresses that none of these assumptions alone implies that states will act aggressively toward each other, but that the "fusion" between these five assumptions creates a dangerous world. In these circumstances, the states are afraid of each other and they can be protected in only one way or that is to gain more and more power. This attitude increases the sense of insecurity in other states, due to which other states also start efforts similarly.

5   Russia-Ukraine War with an Offensive Realist lens

If we observe the whole sequence of the Russian-Ukrainian war we find that offensive realism reflects time to time in the international arena. For instance, in the 2008 NATO summit was held in Bucharest attempted to get Ukraine closer to the West. The Summit Declaration shows that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO" and that "these countries will become members of NATO" [29]. Although no further apparent steps were taken for the military inclusion of Ukraine in the Western alliance, Russia considered it as a direct threat. Russia also considered the expansion of the European Union as a threat to itself, because European Union has launched the Eastern Partnership program in 2008 to support regional cooperation and strengthen European Union's relations with its eastern neighbours [30]. On the other hand, the European Union tried to get sign an association agreement with Ukraine, which was declined by Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych at the end of 2013. This association wants the economic integration of Ukraine into the West. However, this activity would have been a hostile action to Russia's interest. Nevertheless, this veto aroused serious protests in Ukraine that led to the overthrow of President Yanukovych and finally made Russia respond by military intervention in Ukraine [31].

It is a popular belief that Russia's conflict with Ukraine (including the annexation of Crimea) was an emotional defensive response by Russian President Vladimir Putin to the European Union's strive to merge Ukraine and to the fall of the Yanukovych regime. However, some prominent facts suggest that it was not necessarily the case. Moving back to Ukraine, Russia's strategic control has been a long-term goal of Moscow since the decline of the Soviet Union as some scholars suggest. In that context, Russia adopted an offensive strategy by forcing Ukraine to join the Customs Union and drop the idea of its association with the European Union, which led to a political crisis and eventually revolution in Ukraine. As the situation in Ukraine flourished against Russia's interests, Moscow decided to intervene, including with military exercises, to divide Ukraine, with the occupation of Crimea and subsequently war in Donbas.

For various reasons, Ukraine has been crucial for Russia. For two centuries, most territories of contemporary Ukraine were parts of different Russian states (from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union). Soviet Ukraine played a crucial

part in Soviet Union's economy in respect of its rich agriculture and developed industry, while Crimea has been a strategically important Soviet military stronghold in the Black Sea area. Ukraine's push for independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s strongly contributed to the decline of the Soviet Union while the leadership of the new Russian Federation was interested in maintaining some form of state integration including Ukraine which initiated the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) established by Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in early December 1991. Therefore, the political will of Moscow to keep Ukraine as close to it as possible, Russia's weakness, and its economic interests, as well as Ukraine's priority of stronger independence, led to rivalries of links between the two countries.

When the Russian economy became stronger under the leadership of Vladimir Putin starting in 1999, the Kremlin (which was formerly the residence of the Russian emperor in Moscow, the complex now serves as the official residence of the Russian president) increased its efforts to reintegrate post-soviet states (including Ukraine) into its sphere of influence. The main expressions of this policy were subsequent Eurasian integration projects. First was the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) lobbied for by Putin and formally created in October 2000. Ukraine refused to join and became an observer in May 2002. Russia did not give up and provided political and economic support to the elections to choose the prime minister and successor Victor Yanukovych, in which a reduction in the price of Russian gas for Ukraine by more than half in 2003 was included. In the replacement of Russian support, the political price for Ukraine was its participation in the new Moscow-led organization: the Single Economic Space (SES) of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan which was declared by the four presidents in February 2003, with the basic agreement following in September. This integration project was in the relation to European Union. However, after the "Orange Revolution" [32] in Ukraine of 2004- 05, the new pro-European government formed in Kyiv, which was much to Moscow's displeasure, apart from this discontinued Ukraine's participation in the project and prioritized European integration, which led to the failure of the SES. But Russia did not give up. In June 2009, Putin then announced preparations for the establishment of a Customs Union (CU) between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. A series of documents creating a basis for the Customs Union and it entered into force on January 1, 2010, later followed by its next spans: the Common Economic Space (CES) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In this way, Russia wanted to create a "Russian World" and also wanted Ukraine to be a part of that world where states remain bound together by Moscow-controlled structures of political, economic, and possibly military integration and these states refrain from pursuing any policies that may be perceived as going against Russia's interests. On the other hand, Russia could not allow Ukraine to become part of the European Union. This scenario would create a risk to Russia's efforts to put Ukraine under Russian strategic control and European Union's reforms could transform Ukraine, and it was possible that European Union would become Ukraine's role model [33].

There are many reasons for the war between Russia and Ukraine, but the biggest reason is believed to be the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In 1949, NATO, an organization was formed to deal with the then-Soviet Union. Thirty countries of the world including America and Britain are members of NATO. Together they played an important role in breaking up the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union broke up in the last month of 1991. Until 1991, Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. Fifteen countries came into existence after the breakup of the Soviet Union–Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO expanded under the leadership of the United States. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined NATO in 2004 among the countries that broke away from the Soviet Union. Due to this, the danger on the border of Russia increased and Russia started feeling insecure. Then in 2008, Georgia and Ukraine were also invited to join NATO, but both countries could not become members. Russian President Putin expressed his concern about this and lodged an objection. But regardless of Putin's objections, the NATO countries opened the way for Georgia to join NATO. Enraged by this, in 2008, Russia recognized Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries. Tensions between Russia and Ukraine began in November 2013, when pro-Russia protests against then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych began in Kyiv. In February 2014, Yanukovych had to leave the country due to protests by United States-United Kingdom-backed protesters. Because of this, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in southern Ukraine. An ongoing conflict in the Donbas province between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian military has been happening since 2014. Most of the people in Crimea are Russian language speakers and they feel more attached to Russia.

6   Discussion and Conclusion

If we analyze the whole theme of Russian-Ukrainian War with an offensive realist approach we find that offensive realist arguments seem true in the following way. The NATO expansion and the European Union association process are two major factors that must not be neglected in the Ukrainian crisis [34]. For instance, in 2008 NATO summit was held in Bucharest and it attempted to get Ukraine closer to the West. However, further steps were not taken for the military incorporation of Ukraine into the Western alliance, but Russia considered that statement as a direct threat to itself. The expansion of the European Union had a similar impression on Russia. Apart from this, European Union launched the

Eastern Partnership Program in 2008 and tried to get a sign on an association agreement with Ukraine, which was declined by Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych in 2013. Coming into this association would have meant economic integration of Ukraine into the West. However, this activity would have been a threatening action to Russia's interest. Nevertheless, this veto aroused serious protests in Ukraine that led to the overthrow of President Yanukovych and finally, Russia responded by military intervention in Ukraine. As Western activities attempted to change the *status quo* of the relative power which would create Russia's sense of insecurity, then the principles of realists' 'self-help' theme forced Putin to react by military means. In this context, Russian military intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine made a radical step toward the recuperation of the balance of powers [35].

Mearsheimer also believes that the West is totally responsible for Russia's behaviour, especially United States that push Russia to fight back. He believes that Western provocations began in the mid-1990s when NATO engaged in bombing ethnic Serb artillery in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Serbs were historically considered Orthodox Slavs, the Russians. After the decline of the USSR, in 1999, NATO started accepting new members from the former Soviet empire, initiating with Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Due to making efforts by NATO, in 2004, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania all connected with NATO. In 2008, NATO officials publicly considered the idea joining of Ukraine and another former Soviet republic, Georgia. Mearsheimer believes that France (under the Napoleon reign), imperial and Nazi Germany all crossed this flat land to strike at Russia, therefore, Ukraine serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia [36].

Therefore, Russia is fighting this war in the name of demilitarization and de-Nazification of Ukraine. It is well known that one of the demands for capitulation put forward to Ukraine by Russia and its clique is the one term that they use to justify Russian aggression—de-Nazification. Most states associate this term with Hitler's Nazism and the aspiration of humankind after World War II to get rid of this misanthropic ideology, which enshrines the domination of one nation over others. In the late 20th century, no country in the world professed this ideology. But Putin wants to show that, like the West, it is also moving towards democratization and is fighting a war only to save Ukraine. The matter of how to call a war unleashed by Putinist Russia is sometimes disputed. Some scholars suggest calling it "Patriotic War", others say– "National Liberation War". However, pro-soviets believe that perhaps it would be better to call it the "Fight for Ukraine" [37].

Thus, this war is best viewed and interpreted through the lens of offensive realism where it can be assumed that the international order is anarchic, there is no central authority, or where the Great Powers have to adopt the ideal of self-help to maintain the international order and their survival. The continuation of the war shows that the Great Powers possess some offensive military capacity. It may also be observed that states can never be sure of the intentions of other states. Russia and European Union or the United States all seem to be demonstrating their power for their survival. But looking at the actions of both, it seems that both the West and Russia are deliberately involved in this war. Thus, the five rules that Mearsheimer has suggested are necessary for offensive realism seem to be fulfilled here. It seems that Russia and the West are again headed for a new Cold War and the world has become bipolar again.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Author declared that there is no 'conflict of interest' in this manuscript publication.

7   References

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