Mearsheimer, Putin, ideology, and the war in Ukraine

A political discourse analysis

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This article questions the offensive realist explanation of the war in Ukraine found in the work of John Mearsheimer. It argues that Mearsheimer’s failure to take seriously predispositional factors means his account of the war offers an incomplete basis for discerning motives, predicting the conflict’s evolution, or responding to Russian aggression. To address this deficit and explain how ideological beliefs and meanings expressed in discourse are shaping Russia’s prosecution of the war, the article sets out an interpretive framework that draws on insights into armed conflict and ideology from the likes of Michael Freeden and Jonathan Leader Maynard as well as contributions to Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) primarily in the work of Teun van Dijk. To explore the Russian ideological and discursive aspects at play in the Ukraine war, the article fixes its analytical gaze on an address delivered by Putin to the Russian nation on February 24, 2022.

Keywords: Mearsheimer, offensive-realism, Putin, great power, ideology, discourse, prediction, War, Ukraine

1. Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, Russian forces invaded Ukraine on four fronts, and launched an ultimately unsuccessful assault on Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. By this action, the Putin regime triggered the first war in Europe between two sovereign states since the end of the Second World War. While the invasion has raised many questions, one of the most intriguing is why the record of experts making predictions about it has been, to say the least, so patchy, with many failing to contemplate either the possibility of an invasion in the first place or the extent of its ambition once it had taken place. This failure seems especially puzzling given the widely accepted military situation on the ground at the time of the invasion.
with more than one hundred thousand battle-ready Russian troops amassed on Ukraine’s borders with Russia and Belarus.

The invasion itself is not the only aspect of the war that appears to have taken many by surprise. Other areas of revelation include Russia’s inability to achieve many of its military objectives, attacks on civilian targets and what appears to be a concerted effort to destroy much of Ukraine’s cultural heritage. Thus, since the beginning of the conflict, more than 200 heritage sites have been destroyed by Russian forces. As Lister argues (2022), several of these attacks appear to have been deliberate acts of cultural vandalism. On May 6th 2022, for example, Russian artillery destroyed the historic home of the Ukrainian poet and philosopher, Hryhorii Skovoroda, as well as a museum of his work. Although possible that this was not deliberate targeting, it seems unlikely given the location, a small village near Kharkiv some distance from any obvious military targets (Lister 2022).

Poor prediction performance is far from being an isolated phenomenon. It was widely reported, for example, that the French Military Intelligence Chief, General Eric Vidaud, was sacked due to his failure to foresee the Russian attack (see McLaren-Kennedy 2022). Arguably, of even greater significance, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself cautioned against the possibility of a “broad escalation on the part of Russia” in the days leading up to the invasion (Zelenskyy 2022). In the political sciences too, there were those that considered an invasion unlikely. John Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, for example, claimed, just over a week before Russian troops and armour rolled in that “Putin had no intention of invading Ukraine”. He advanced this argument on the grounds that it would be irrational for Putin to launch an attack given the potentially crippling economic impact of Western sanctions in the event of Russian aggression, and the costs and challenges involved in occupying Ukraine (Kings Politics 2022).

While Mearsheimer’s analysis of the conflict has received widespread coverage, subsequent events on the ground in Ukraine point to the inaccuracy of his prediction, and as argued in this article, the failings of the offensive realist theoretical framework upon which it rests. From Mearsheimer’s perspective, state interests and actions such as those of Putin, are determined by the anarchic structure of the international state system and the balance of power within it, and not, as will be argued here, by the ideological beliefs, contingent interpretations and values embodied and diffused in politicians’ political discourse. As Mearsheimer explains (2001, 11):

Structural factors such as anarchy and the distribution of power, I argue, are what matter for explaining international politics. The theory pays little attention to individuals or domestic political considerations such as ideology. It tends to treat
states like black boxes or billiard balls. For example, it does not matter for the theory whether Germany in 1905 was led by Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm, or Adolf Hitler, or whether Germany was democratic or autocratic. What matters for the theory is how much relative power Germany possessed at the time.

As a counterpoint to such views, this article argues that the exclusion of such predispositional factors as the value systems of political leaders has serious analytical and practical implications. On the one hand, it means that plausible prediction scenarios such as in the Ukraine case, an aggressive invasion based on contingent claims about Russia’s great power status, the decadence of the West, and Ukraine’s place within the “Russian World”, are excluded a priori. On the other, the failure to predict with any measure of accuracy adversaries’ intentions, means that states might cede tactical advantage to their rivals and/or remain unprepared, both materially and psychologically, for war. More widely, the international community might also miss opportunities to engage in diplomacy to address grievances and prevent war prior to invasions taking place or be ill-equipped to cope with the inevitable shocks to the international system ensuing from conflict as has happened in the case of the war in Ukraine.

To address offensive realism’s shortcomings, this paper outlines an alternative approach to the predictability of conflict. It argues that to interpret the motivations and better predict the actions of decision-makers in war requires a methodology that focuses detailed attention on political leaders’ ideological beliefs and values as revealed through careful analysis of their discourse. Only in this way, it argues, might more realistic appraisals of intentions and behaviour emerge, and contingencies be put in place to deter threats of violence or mitigate their impact. To develop this claim, the article proceeds in three stages. It begins by analysing the interpretation of Russia’s war aims and motivations in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 located in the work of John Mearsheimer one of the leading and most important offensive realist thinkers in the field of Security Studies today. Secondly, it draws together strands on armed conflict (Leader Maynard, 2019) and ideology (Freeden 1994, 1996, 2003, 2013, 2017; Laclau 1990, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) with contributions to Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) by van Dijk (1995, 1997, 1998) to explain how interrelated beliefs that are produced, reproduced, and contested through discourse shape human agency in war. Thirdly, this framework is used to interrogate Putin’s assessment of the situation in Ukraine on the eve of war and the ideological values and beliefs colouring his actions.
2. Theoretical framework

Much has been made of realism’s neglect of the moral and ideological foundations of war (see, for example, Sanin and Wood 2014). As demonstrated by the above quote (Mearsheimer 2001, 11), such factors are irrelevant because military action is always seen as a response to strategic imperatives such as safeguarding national security in the face of external threats or guaranteeing the supply of scarce power resources. In such circumstances, while the action is often accompanied by some form of “ideational justification” this constitutes little more than a “rhetorical device” or “merely window wash” (Collier & Hoefller 2001, cited in Gutierrez Sanin & Wood 2014, 2013).

In the Ukraine case, the clearest example of offensive realist thinking can be found in the work of John Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer’s views on the causes and remedies of the Ukraine crisis have found a large and willing audience since he first set them out in his article, *Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin* (Mearsheimer 2014). Remarkably, a similarly titled lecture he delivered at the University of Chicago in 2015 has been viewed 28 million times on YouTube (UChicago 2015). He has also given wide-ranging interviews to important media outlets such as *The New Yorker* (Chotine, 2022) and *Unherd* (Sayers 2022) since the Russian invasion in February 2022.

Politically, his analysis has been appropriated by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see Tooze 2022), which just prior to the invasion tweeted a link to Mearsheimer’s above mentioned 2014 article, and by forces on both the “anti-imperialist left” and the “isolationist right” (Kirchick 2022). In the case of the former, it has taken solace from Mearsheimer’s blaming of the ‘Western alliance’ for triggering the war through its misguided efforts to turn Ukraine into a liberal democracy integrated into both the EU and NATO. On the right, a diverse spectrum of actors and voices such as former congressman and presidential candidate, Ron Paul and The Ohio senator, J. D. Vance has signalled its agreement with Mearsheimer’s views (Gardey 2022).

Of course, he has also been the object of intense criticism from a number of quarters. Anne Applebaum for one, has painted him as an apologist for Russian aggression providing legitimacy for what she sees as Putin’s war (see Schwarz 2022). Douthat (2022) on the other hand, raises three main objections to Mearsheimer’s account of the conflict. Firstly, that by emphasising “great power force projection as the only thing that matters”, Mearsheimer suggests that Putin had no choice other than to follow the dictates of the international system and denies the agency of Ukrainians to resist. Secondly, that Mearsheimer’s eschewal of moral considerations in his accounts of global politics, legitimises “imperialist appetites” and blames the victims, “when the moral responsibility for aggression
ultimately rests with the aggressor.” Thirdly, that the invasion was motivated less by defensive intent, and more by “Putin’s professed and very personal desire to restore a mystical vision of greater Russia- a grand ideological idea that the mere Western pledge not to admit Ukraine to NATO was unlikely to appease.” (Sikorski 2022).

In his scholarship on Ukraine, Mearsheimer (see, for example, 2014) has been a strident critic of the Western powers, which stand accused by him of stoking conflict with Russia. He is particularly critical of: assurances made to Georgia and Ukraine at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that they would become members of NATO; European attempts to develop closer ties with Ukraine as part of a process of transition towards European Union membership; and Western support for Ukraine’s Orange Revolution. Together, these actions by Western powers constitute a threat to Russian strategic interests and pose a significant challenge to its position as the preeminent power in the region.

From his perspective, the notion that Putin was aggressive or bore responsibility for the 2022 invasion was little more than Western propaganda. As Mearsheimer says in The Munk Debate- The Russian War (Sikorski 2022):

It’s very important to understand that we invented this story that Putin is highly aggressive and he’s principally responsible for this crisis in Ukraine.

Mearsheimer is very clear that in his legitimate great power response to this aggression, there was never any intention on Putin’s part to ‘re-create the Soviet Union or try to build a Greater Russia or that he was interested in conquering Ukraine:

There’s no evidence that he [Putin] thinks that’s desirable. There’s no evidence that he thinks that’s feasible and there’s nothing in the public record that he’s ever said that that’s what he intends to do. (The Munk Debate- The Russian War 2022)

In this regard, Mearsheimer cites a televised address to the Russian people delivered by Putin on February 24th, 2022, on the eve of the invasion, which he claims contains, “no evidence ... that he was interested in conquering Ukraine and integrating it into Russia” (The Munk Debate- The Russian War 2022). As regards what this means for the US led Western alliance, he believes that it should appease Putin’s aggression especially as the real threat it faces to its world power status comes from China not Russia.
3. Ideology

Mearsheimer’s position on the causes of armed conflict as well as that of others working within the realist tradition, has come under sustained pressure in recent years from work linking “ideology with demonstrable effects on multiple forms of organised violence” (Leader Maynard 2019, 635). For Gutierrez Sanin and Wood (2014, 214), for example, neglect of ideology leaves “major war-related phenomena unexplained.”

According to advocates of this alternative perspective such as Leader Maynard (2019), the ability to take account of ideology in armed conflict has been expedited by a convergence in the extant literature towards what he describes as a “broad conceptualisation of ideology”. Paradigmatic of this, he argues, is Freeden’s (1996, 3) morphological casting of ideology as:

A system of political thinking, loose or rigid, deliberate or unintended, through which individuals or groups construct and understand the political world they, or those who preoccupy their thoughts, inhabit and then act on that understanding.

In his widely cited contribution to debates on ideology, Freeden (1994, 141) explores how patterned clusters and configurations of “core, adjacent and peripheral political concepts [...] shape individual and social cognition and practices”. Core beliefs he argues, constitute the fundamental ideas upon which ideological belief systems are built. In the case of long-standing ideologies, or what Leader Maynard (2019) refers to as the “big isms” such as socialism and liberalism, for example, the core is made up of concepts central to their worldview like equality in the case of socialism and individual freedom and the rule of law in liberalism (see Freeden 2003, 81).

The excessive preoccupation with “big isms” in work by the likes of Freeden sometimes obscures and distracts attention away from “hybrid” and “unconventional” ideological formations that do not align with mainstream understandings (Leader Maynard 2019). This is a particular issue in research on armed conflict, which often needs “to work with more precise articulations of the ideologies of actors under study and treat the appropriate scale of aggregation as an open question” (Leader Maynard 2019, 638). As Wood and Thomas (2017, 33) are at pains to point out:

Big isms have their place, but their familiarity is no reason to expect that they actually identify the set of ideas which shape particular conflict behaviour and they can obscure unconventional, hybrid or contextually specific ideologies.

To bridge the gap between the socially shared “big isms” and their manifestation in the social practices (discourse and action) of political leaders such as Putin, this
paper draws on the concept of cognition and individual cognitive mental models residing in long-term memory (van Dijk 2002). According to van Dijk (2002), as well as instantiating socially shared general beliefs, mental models embody the personal knowledge and opinions of speakers born from their unique experiences as well as their subjective understandings of important contextual dimensions of discourse events such as the institutional setting, the present political situation, the timing of the discourse, their role, and the audience it is presented to. Crucially, while ideologies are shared intersubjectively by groups, they do not take the same form inside the mind of every member. As Blommaert and Verschueren (1998, 24) point out, understanding and applying abstract ideological concepts is “a layered and structured phenomenon which allows for a range of interindividual and intergroup variability”.

Once constituted, speakers’ cognitive models are expressed most tangibly in their text and talk making empirical investigation of ideology, by necessity, discourse-centred. In the case of politicians like Putin, such research invariably reveals the influence of several ideological frameworks, not all of which are complementary. In his study of a speech delivered by a member of the United Kingdom (UK) conservative party on immigration, for example, van Dijk (2002, 223) reveals traces of nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism, and populism, alongside a firm commitment to democracy. These ideological models control several aspects of the speech including the representations of immigrants, attitudes to criminality, opinions about the UK, and general attitudes about the need for ordinary people to have a voice.

The mediating effect of ideological mental models can also be seen in the extent to which they shape the practice of war as demonstrated by an increasingly rich body of research documenting the relationship between mental representations and forms of organised violence including between states (Haas 2005; Owen 2010). One way that ideology does this is by providing a moral measure for identifying legitimate military targets such as nation states, ethnic-communities and/or other societal groupings such as women. In his contribution, Leader Maynard (2019, 636) discusses the extent to which “sincerely internalised worldviews” influence military and security affairs directly through the decisions of committed leaders or indirectly because of their institutionalisation in the rules, norms, policies, and practices of states. These structures, he argues, incentivise compliance by generating opportunities and constraints that guide and influence individuals’ choices:

Dominant ideologies ... exert social influence on individuals, generating structural opportunities, constraints, and incentives that encourage individuals to comply with ideologies irrespective of their own underlying views.
In his contribution, Freeden (1996) recognises the contingency of ideological configurations and meanings and the possibility of conceptual change. That said, ideologies seek to close-down or “hold constant” both ‘equivocal and contingent meaning’ through a process Freeden (1996, 54–66) describes as “decontestation”. This is considered crucial in efforts to provide dominant conceptualisations with a certain rigidity and to contain challenges from either alternative ideologies or from within the same ideological framework, looking to undermine or introduce new understandings and configurations of core, adjacent and peripheral concepts. What ensues Freeden, (1996, 75–82) argues, is a “form of conceptual competition”, whereby ideologies perform “a continuous “decontestation” of its concepts; that is, it tries to eliminate all possible contestation of its own conceptual definitions.”

Comparable issues of indeterminacy and fluidity of ideological meanings as well as the idea of semantic closure, are also prominent in the work of Laclau (1990, 1996), Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and van Brussel et al. (2019). The latter (2019, 5–7), for example, stress “the fixation of meaning” within ‘contexts of instability’ and the ‘space for agency’ that ideological contingency and mutability provides. According to Laclau (1990), opportunities for the appearance of new subjectivities are heightened during periods of “dislocation” when dominant ideologies face new events and situations that they struggle to domesticate or explain. This “lack” provides a space for subjects armed with new explanatory frameworks and ideas to fill the void with alternative ideological configurations.

4. Re-ideologisation and the war in Ukraine

Dislocation, which Stavrakakis (2000, 105) understands as the “failure and subversion of a system of representation” provides an explanatory mechanism for understanding the profound ideological transformation experienced by Putin since the beginning of his second term as President of the Russian Federation. Since 2012, Putin has undergone a process of re-ideologisation characterised by growing belief in Russia’s great power status, a strong anti-West and anti-liberal stance, backward-looking reactionism, patriotism, the rise of Russian Worldism, the championing of Russian particularism and a move in the direction of Russian orthodox values, traditions, and beliefs. The political consequences of Putin’s turn towards a more conservative worldview are reflected in both domestic and foreign policy. Domestically, authority has been centralised and Russia has embraced a model of what is referred to as ‘managed democracy’ with strict limits on political and media freedoms (Kazharski & Macalova 2020, 28). Close ties have been forged between the Russian state and the Orthodox Church. This has been accompanied by a “culture war” narrative that urges respect for family values, and
the passing of socially conservative legislation outlawing “gay propaganda” and defining marriage as “exclusively between a man and a woman” (Wakefield 2021).

According to Pisciotta (2020, 87), Putin’s foreign policy amounts to “deep rejection of modern Western values and an attempt to draw a clear line between Russia’s world and Europe’s.” This rejection has found expression in rhetorical attacks and the use of cyber warfare against liberal politicians such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Putin has also forged ties with politicians such as Donald Trump (during the 2016 presidential election campaign), Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orban and Silvio Berlusconi that share his conservative views. These, in turn, have appropriated several of Putin’s ideological claims in their musings on Russia’s relations with the West and about the causes of the conflict with Ukraine. Berlusconi, for example, has repeated Russian claims about Ukrainian provocation, thereby eliciting an angry riposte from the Ukrainian authorities accusing him of spreading Russian propaganda (Reuters 2023). In the US media context, right-wing commentators such as Tucker Carlson, Candace Owens, Lara Logan, and far-right podcaster, Joe Oltmann, have been reported by the New York Times to have repeated Russian accusations about the US’ ultimate responsibility for the Russian invasion and the Nazi leanings of Zelenskyy’s government.

Appropriation of Putin’s views has also found its echo on the left with a long list of stalwarts ranging from Noam Chomsky (see Kukharskyy et al. 2023) to former ex-Pink Floyd frontman, Roger Waters, standing accused of repeating Russian claims about the West’s responsibility for the crisis. In the case of Waters, for example, after an interview with the Berliner Zeitung (2023) in which he expressed support for Putin, he was invited by the Russian authorities to address the UN Security Council in New York City. Water’s intervention was strongly condemned by the Ukrainian ambassador to the UN, Sergiy Kyslytsya, who accused him of “accepting the role of just another brick in the wall- the wall of Russian disinformation and propaganda” (Borger 2023).

5. Putin’s Speech

According to Drozdova and Robinson (2019), Putin’s ideological turn towards a more deeply conservative worldview that looks backwards for inspiration to Russia’s imperial past, coincided with a turbulent period in Russian/Ukrainian relations. This, they argue, culminated firstly, in Russia’s annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and secondly, the destabilisation of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. Vestiges of this thinking are clearly present in the extracts of Putin’s (2022) Address by the President of the Russian Federation to the Russian nation on February 24
on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine selected for interrogation in the analysis that follows.

The extracts, which have been selected for their marked ideological significance, are analysed using an approach known as Political Discourse Analysis (PDA). Van Dijk (1997) identifies the main object of study in PDA as the discourse (text and talk) produced by political actors in the performance of their professional roles and duties, in contexts ranging from election campaigns to parliamentary committees. As a class of genres, it encompasses a variety of written and spoken texts such as pamphlets, websites, laws, parliamentary debates and political speeches. These are interrogated to reveal the ideological dimensions of politicians’ beliefs. As van Dijk explains, (2006, 732), ‘discourses make ideologies observable in the sense that it is only in discourse that they may be explicitly expressed and formulated.’

To gain access to ideology and its political function in concrete contexts and situations, political discourse analysts deploy a methodological toolbox comprised of numerous discursive elements and linguistic resources. These include sentence types (imperatives, interrogatives, or exclamations), aspects of semantics (tense, lexis, syntax etc.), metaphors, speech acts, phonological categories such as intonation and the range of rhetorical forms and devices traditionally associated with political speech. In terms of semantics, pronominal polarisation is often used in political discourse to divide the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’ positions. As demonstrated in this article, the discursive construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is also achieved through recourse to transitivity, speech acts, metaphors, and rhetorical questions all of which are used by Putin in the speech to construct a positive view of Russia and to blame the West and what he describes as Zelenskyy’s “neo-nazi” regime for leaving Russia with no option but to invade.

5.1 Function

Beginning with the purpose of the speech, its main political function is to persuade Russians and allies beyond Russia’s borders of the legitimacy of the invasion and to ready them for military action. This is primarily achieved in the text by laying the blame at the West’s/”Their” door for causing the crisis and representing Russia/”Us” as left with no alternative but to reluctantly invade. This “Them” and “Us” dichotomy is established, above all, in the speech by pronominal polarisation in which opposing pronouns such as we/they, us/them and theirs/ours are juxtaposed. In the extract that follows, Putin uses pronominal polarisation as part of his denunciation of the West (a synedoche used throughout the speech to refer to the US and its allies) for what he sees as its dishonesty and underhand maneuvering in the context of NATO’s eastward expansion.
To reiterate: they have deceived us, or, to put it simply, they have played us (...)
Where is justice and truth here? Just lies and hypocrisy all around.

In this extract, Putin also uses a rhetorical question (where is justice and truth here?), one of several deployed in the speech, to express his vehement indignation at the West and NATO’s duplicity in its dealings with Russia. Rhetorical questions are used by speakers to generate strong emotional effects amongst their audience such as in this case by Putin to generate feelings of fear and outrage at the West’s actions and to mobilise public opinion in support of the invasion (Abioye 2009).

The claim that the invasion was a largely defensive response to Western aggression and to the existential threat it poses to Russia is most clearly apparent in Extract 2. In it, Putin mixes transitivity, pronominal polarisation and metaphors such as “life and death” and “red line” to attribute blame (to the West), warn of the extent of the threat it poses, and signal Russia’s readiness to deploy military forces in defense of its national security interests. This warning also acts as a ‘call to arms’ to the Russian public to back the invasion.

(2) For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation. This is not an exaggeration: this is a fact. It is not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty. It is the red line which we have spoken about on numerous occasions. They have crossed it.

Transitivity analysis centres on the interpretation of reality and how such meanings are encoded in language. It is relevant to the study of ideology since as Matu (2008, 202) says, “it makes options available, some possibilities are always suppressed, so the choice a speaker makes (...) indicates that the speaker’s point of view is ideologically significant.” According to Halliday (1994), the transitivity structure is comprised of three main elements: participants (agent, recipient), circumstances (when, where etc.) and process of which there are three main types: material, mental and relational, and three subsidiary types: behavioural, verbal and existential processes. In the case of “they have crossed the line”, Putin mixes transitivity metaphor with the “red line” metaphor to depict an entity (they/the West) as having done something (crossed) to another entity (the line).

Another device used by Putin to create a sense of fear and to justify the invasion is proximisation, which according to Sowinska (2013, 797), “draws on the speaker’s ability to present the events on the discourse stage as directly affecting the addressee, usually in a negative or threatening way.” This is apparent in Putin’s use of a present continuous aspect to create a sense of NATO’s eastward expansion moving inexorably and menacingly closer in both time (“is moving”) and space (“closer to the Russian border”). It serves as a warning to all Russians of the
imminent dangers they face if no action is taken and to the wider world of the legitimacy of Russia’s military response.

Proximisation features prominently in extract three in which Putin again repeats his claim about the military threat approaching Russia’s border.

(3) It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border.

While the analysis thus far would seem to corroborate Mearsheimer’s claims about legitimate Russian fears of NATO’s eastwards expansion, it also shows how this calculation, contrary to offensive realist expectations, is closely interwoven with domestic political concerns. Accordingly, Putin’s framing of the risk as imminent, plays an important domestic political role in legitimising the invasion and steeling the Russian people for the war to come. Moreover, the highly emotive form this claim takes, combining angry accusations of Western duplicity, distorted views of the Ukrainian government, and images of Russia’s heroic military past, suggests a Putin so emotionally and ideologically caught up in the conflict that any “realistic” threat assessment at this point, on the eve of war, might conceivably have been beyond his reach.

5.2 Reactionism

The reactionism that Pisciotta (2020) explores in his analysis of Putin’s foreign policy, finds clear expression in the text in the use of a temporal frame that starts in the present and draws a line back to the glorious past of Imperial/Soviet Russia when Ukraine and Russia were united. Such framing serves to cast the war as a resumption of Russia’s struggle against the evils of Nazism and taps into memories of shared sacrifice against a common external enemy during the Great Patriotic War.

(4) I would also like to address the military personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Comrade officers, your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine.

The use of the terms “Nazi” and “neo-Nazi” or the claim that the main aim of the war is to “de-nazify” Ukraine is highly significant given the way such insults
connect the shared heroic past with the present in Russian and Ukranian minds and act as a warning of what will happen if no action is taken. Such references serve to demonise the Ukranian government and those citizens that resist Russia’s ambitions in Ukraine as morally abhorrent. By othering as evil those to whom it is applied, these terms, laden with historical significance, serve to legitimise the war and sanction acts of violence committed against the Ukranian people. In this context, at least one influential commentator, Timothy Snyder (2022a, 2022b), has hinted at the link between such demonisation and the atrocities/abuses (mass killings, rape and deportations) attributed to Russian forces during the war’s prosecution and Russia’s real aim, which he sees as the “destruction of the Ukranian state and nation.”

5.3 Great power status

The resurrection of Russia’s image of itself as a great power and regional hegemon are reflected in Putin’s claims about Russia’s attempt to roll back the rules of the international system and undo the post-Cold War settlement established after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

(5) Despite all that, in December 2021, we made yet another attempt to reach agreement with the United States and its allies on the principles of European security and NATO’s non-expansion.

According to Pisciotta (2020), Russia’s efforts to rewrite the rules of the international order and reassert its status as a “sovereign global power” with freedom to act within its designated sphere of influence, began with the war in Georgia in 2008, found their most aggressive expression, at least prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, in the annexation of Crimea and involvement in Eastern Ukraine starting in 2014 and include the military intervention in Syria from 2015. In each case, an emboldened Putin demonstrated willingness, despite the risk of sanctions, to flout international norms governing the use of military force, to retake land previously belonging to the USSR and to demonstrate Russia’s great power status. Putin’s vision of a multi-polar world in which Russia is one of several equally balanced great powers is also reflected in the speech in the threats it contains to countries tempted to intervene in Russia’s sphere of influence:

(6) No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.
The effect of this directive is to highlight Russia's power and status on the global stage and to convince Putin's audience of his preparedness to use all military means necessary to achieve his goals.

5.4 Liberal values

As well as being a response to a perceived threat to Russia's physical security and integrity, Putin leaves little doubt that the action is as much about rolling back the influence of Western imposed liberal ideals and values as it is about territory. Hence, using a combination of pronominal polarisation, dystopian imagery, and rhetoric consistent with the conservative ideological turn witnessed in Russia since Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, he argues:

(7) they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature. This is not going to happen. No one has ever succeeded in doing this, nor will they succeed now.

5.5 Russian World

The other dimension of the post-2012 ideological landscape that features prominently in the speech is that of the “Russian World” and Ukraine's place within it. According to Kazharski (2020, 27), the powerful wave of nationalism triggered by the annexation of Crimea brought more sharply into focus one of the most important conceptual pieces of the contemporary Russian ideological puzzle, the idea of the Russian World. This idea has undergone profound transformation since it first started to circulate within obscure Russian intellectual circles in the 1990s to its current prominence as:

an empty signifier, powerful enough to crystallise around itself an official ideology of the last two or three years. It would not be a stretch to say that we deal with a new ideological ‘-ism’, ‘Russian Worldism’ condensing not only a specific conceptual system but also a teleological perspective. (Suslov 2018, 4)

Similar Russian World sentiment is present in the discourse of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all of Rus. As Head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Kirill has forged close relations with Putin since the latter’s return to power in 2012, becoming his key spiritual ally and providing him with a new source of legitimacy based on traditional Orthodox values. According to Suslov (2018), Krill has a “paleoge-
netic” understanding of the Russian World that denies independent statehood to Ukraine. For Krill, states such as Ukraine and Belarus are organically bound to Russia by essentialist ties of culture language and identity and have no legitimacy as independent sovereign states.

Putin (2021) used his essay titled, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* to articulate his belief in the organic indivisibility of Russians and Ukrainians which he defined as, “one people, a single whole ... the same historical and spiritual space”, and situated Ukraine, alongside Russia and Belarus, as “descendants of Ancient Rus”. Importantly for subsequent events in Ukraine, he also used this opportunity to leave no doubt about the part played by the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, in the history of Russian civilisation:

The throne of Kyiv held a dominant position in ancient Rus. This has been the custom since the late 9th century. The tale of Bygone Years captured for prosperity the words of Oleg the Prophet about Kyiv, ‘let it be the mother of all Russian cities.

This is a thread that runs (more or less) explicitly throughout Putin’s 24 February speech serving to unite Russians and Ukrainians as one people. To this end, Putin employs the metaphor of “connection” to emphasise the nexus between the “Ukrainian people” and those “defending Russia from those who have taken Ukraine hostage.” He also claims that the “territories adjacent to Russia”, i.e., Ukraine, are part of Russia’s “traditional lands” and “our common motherland” and, as such, have no right to independent statehood. Tellingly, he argues that the fact that ‘millions of Russians’ live in Ukraine, means he has a duty to intervene when their security is threatened as he did in the case of Crimea and Sevastopol thereby helping them to “reunite with Russia.” This claim is consistent with the view that because of Russian Worldism, a “mismatch” has emerged between the territory of the Russian Federation and the extent of its authority and obligations that stretch beyond its borders into neighbouring states. As Casula (2020, 218) points out, “Russian foreign policy contains an expansionist potential aimed at preserving influence over territories where ‘compatriots live.”

6. Conclusion

This article began by identifying the poor prediction performance of security agencies, politicians and political scientists such as John Mearsheimer when it comes to the war in Ukraine. In Mearsheimer’s case, while accepting that prediction is fraught with danger, it posits that the main reason for his failure to predict Russia’s invasion is the offensive realist framework used to analyse Russian
and Ukrainian relations. For Mearsheimer, the war is best understood as Russia’s attempt to reset the balance of power in response to a security dilemma posed by NATO’s eastward expansion. From this perspective, Russia’s efforts to balance against the West, is a clear thread running through Russian foreign policy since 2008, encompassing the invasion of Georgia, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, its interventions in support of separatists in the Donbas and its more recent aggression towards Ukraine.

This article has questioned this view. It has demonstrated the limitations of attempts to explain the war in Ukraine based on great power security competition alone. The main reason for the inadequacy of this account, it argues, is the tendency in offensive realism to treat states as undifferentiated units within a reified state system in which the only difference between them is the distribution of power capabilities. Within such contexts, questions of ideological values and belief or political leadership have little to no relevance. Down this road, this paper argues, lies only partial explanation and often faulty prediction.

As seen most clearly in Putin’s framing of the threat from the West as “imminent”, the reality is that the external world is deeply interwoven with domestic political concerns and the ideological beliefs and understandings of political leaders. As Feng (2009, 50) explains, situations are perceived and subjectively interpreted by leaders on the basis of their own cultural beliefs, values and biases, “not transmitted directly into decisions”. This is an insight that security agencies, politicians and political scientists are strongly advised to heed. Only if armed with a detailed understanding of the meanings, values and beliefs of relevant actors, their contingent interpretations of both the international and domestic political contexts and how they animate their political action, will they be able to discern the intentions of a politician like Putin and make better informed predictions about his future conduct.

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