

Connections: The Quarterly Journal
ISSN 1812-1098, e-ISSN 1812-2973

Eka Akobia, *Connections QJ* 24, no. 3 (2025): 8-26
https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.24.3.14

Research Article

Why Russia's War in Ukraine Is Not NATO's Fault: Popular Realism and the Misattribution of Responsibility

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Abstract: This article examines the persistence and political influence of realist interpretations that attribute responsibility for Russia's war against Ukraine to NATO expansion. Such narratives intersect with Russia's hybrid warfare strategy, which normalizes ambiguity and deflects responsibility for unprovoked military aggression. Through an analysis of three dominant strands of popularized realist arguments—the NATO provocation thesis, opposition to military assistance, and advocacy of Ukrainian neutrality—the article shows how these claims marginalize sovereign agency, reify the risks of escalation to the detriment of deterrence, and shift responsibility away from deliberate acts of aggression.

The article argues that selected public-facing realist claims have undergone a process of simplification and reification, transforming analytically contingent propositions into deterministic narratives as they have moved from academic debate into public discourse and policy advocacy. It further argues that this monocausal explanation of the war's causes warrants further exploration, as it has narrowed the scope of available policy options.

The article draws on the concept of "popularized realism" to unpack the process by which selected realist claims have been simplified and reified, producing increasingly deterministic explanations of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Drawing on concepts from the realist tradition, such as the balance of threat, deterrence, and sovereign agency, the article demonstrates that these interpretations are not theoretically exhaustive. It situates NATO enlargement within a broader and more relevant historical sequence, reintroduces the agency of small states into ongoing security dynamics, and revisits the implications of credible commitment problems, thereby challenging monocausal explanations that align with Kremlin narratives and constrain policy outcomes. The findings underscore the need

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for more inclusive theorizing in International Relations that preserves analytical rigor while informing policy discourse in contexts of war and coercion.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, NATO, realism, offensive realism, reification, sovereignty, international relations theory.

Introduction

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a set of arguments commonly associated with realist International Relations theory has gained prominence in public and policy debates. The core of this argument was articulated as early as 2014, during Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea. These arguments rest on three explicit propositions: that NATO's eastward expansion provoked the war; that the West should not support Ukraine militarily because doing so will prolong the war and might lead to nuclear escalation; and that negotiations should guarantee that Ukraine remains a neutral state. Together, these claims have shaped a narrative according to which Western countries and NATO bear primary responsibility for the war and its prolongation.

What makes this narrative analytically and politically significant is its startling convergence with official Russian discourse. The Kremlin has repeatedly emphasized Ukraine's "demilitarization" and "neutralization" as justifiable goals of the invasion.[1] This rhetorical convergence raises an important puzzle: how have realist explanations, developed within a specific academic theoretical tradition, come to function as legitimizing frames for a war of territorial conquest that violates the international order, consolidates hierarchical control, and reinforces Russian regional hegemony in Europe?

This is a significant question because Russia's hybrid warfare strategy relies not only on the coordinated use of military, economic, cyber, and informational instruments but also on shaping the interpretive frameworks through which conflict is understood. Hybrid warfare operates in the gray zone between war and peace, exploiting ambiguity, deniability, and contested narratives to weaken adversaries' cohesion and decision-making.[2] Within this context, popular realist narratives, particularly the NATO provocation thesis, can be understood as forming part of the cognitive and discursive environment in which hybrid warfare unfolds. It is no coincidence that the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs quoted Mearsheimer's 2014 article on its official Twitter account, while Kremlin pundits

[1] "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia (official website), February 24, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.

[2] James K. Wither, "Hybrid Warfare Revisited: A Battle of 'Buzzwords'," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 22, no. 1 (2016): 7-28, https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.22.1.02.

continue to cite explicitly the arguments of prominent realists to provide a veneer of justification for Russia's military aggression and the resulting humanitarian toll.[3]

This article uses the concept of "popularized realism" to describe a process by which selected realist claims moved beyond academic debate and evolved into simplified, increasingly deterministic explanations of Russia's war against Ukraine, effectively narrowing the range of competing interpretations in public and policy discourse. Popularized realism does not refer to realism as a theoretical tradition, nor is it limited to any single strand of realism. Rather, through this concept, the article aims to explain the widespread public circulation of popular realist propositions about the causes of the war as they became detached from internal theoretical debates, scope conditions, competing explanations, and methodological caveats. As a result of this diffusion, contingent analytical claims were increasingly presented as deterministic explanations of political outcomes and as self-evident guides for policy choices by pundits, politicians, and policymakers.

Building on broader academic discussions of reification and the diffusion of theoretical claims beyond academia, this article uses the concept of popularized realism as an instance of the well-known problem concerning the relationship between theory, prediction, and public interpretation. Merton's notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy highlights how widely accepted expectations or predictions can shape political behavior and outcomes.[4] Tetlock's classic work on expert political judgment cautions against excessive confidence in overarching explanatory frameworks, as such frameworks tend to become resistant to contradictory evidence.[5] Similarly, international relations scholars have warned against treating analytical categories as objective realities rather than heuristic tools and against reducing complex political outcomes to a single causal explanation.[6] The popularized realist interpretation of the war in Ukraine is an instance of a broader phenomenon of theory reification and interpretive orthodoxy which deserves separate examination because of its significant policy implications.

In international relations theory, reification occurs when a concept originally intended as an analytical tool is treated as an independent, objective reality, thus obscuring the contingent assumptions underlying theoretical claims. As Kaczmarska argues, "[a] reified category, once it becomes a default language through

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[3] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Twitter post, February 28, 2022, https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1498336076229976076.

[4] Robert K. Merton, "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," *The Antioch Review* 8, no. 2 (1948): 193-210, https://doi.org/10.2307/4609267.

[5] Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* New Edition (Princeton University Press, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400888818.

[6] Richard Ned Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400835126.

which to think and talk about international politics, narrows down avenues for diverging interpretations of international politics." [7]

This article argues that some influential realist explanations of the war in Ukraine, as they have traveled beyond academic settings and been framed for consumption by the wider public, have become too detached from counterarguments, their scope conditions, and internal theoretical consistency. These realist explanations, especially when echoed on social media, in podcast interviews, or during public appearances, have become so popular that they often systematically marginalize the sovereign agency of small and medium-sized states, distort history, and reify the risks of escalation. Such popularized realist arguments have subsequently been incorporated into domestic political discourses, narrowing policy debate to a restricted range of outcomes and treating NATO enlargement as the dominant explanatory factor while discounting alternative variables such as leadership choices, domestic political dynamics, historical sequencing, and the sovereign agency of smaller states.

The article recognizes that Russia bears legal responsibility for the invasion of Ukraine while investigating how the causal and strategic claims advanced within popularized realist interpretations affect perceptions of why the war began. This distinction is important because causal explanations can shape public perceptions of responsibility, which, in turn, often inform policy choices.

By examining three dominant strands of popularized realist argumentation—the "provocation thesis," opposition to military assistance, and advocacy of early negotiations to facilitate Ukraine's neutrality—the article shows how popularized realist interpretations treat NATO enlargement and Western policies as a monocausal explanation while discounting Russian intentions and prior behavior. These interpretations continue to maintain a discursive space in which responsibility is attributed primarily to NATO enlargement rather than to Russia's decision to launch an unprovoked attack on a sovereign nation. The article demonstrates that such arguments are neither empirically nor theoretically consistent and contradict other core realist insights on deterrence, the balance of threat, alliance formation, and sovereignty. The central claim advanced here is that the attribution of blame to NATO enlargement results from simplification and theoretical reification, and that these arguments weaken when sovereign agency and historical context are reintroduced into the analysis. In doing so, the article contributes to broader debates on the importance of more inclusive International Relations theorizing as a foundation for informed and responsible policy discourse.

Methodologically, the article relies on a qualitative desk review of scholarly publications, policy essays, interviews, lectures, podcasts, and public commentary that have featured prominently in debates surrounding the causes, conduct, and resolution of Russia's war against Ukraine. Sources were selected because

[7] Katarzyna Kaczmarska, "Reification in IR: The Process and Consequences of Reifying the Idea of International Society," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (2019): 347-372, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy016.

they represented pertinent and influential articulations of realist interpretations of the war's causes. The primary focus is on influential realist interpretations and their public-facing applications rather than on a systematic analysis of the discourse surrounding the war. The unit of analysis is the argument itself. The article identifies and examines recurring claims concerning NATO enlargement, military assistance, and negotiated neutrality and evaluates these lines of argument against historical evidence, alternative explanations, and other pertinent realist insights regarding deterrence, the balance of threat, alliance formation, and sovereign agency, which are missing from monocausal explanations.

As an exploratory case study, the article does not trace the pathways through which these arguments have diffused across political and media ecosystems. Rather, it assesses their explanatory coherence and policy implications as they have entered broader public and policy debates. Future research on this topic may systematically investigate the pathways through which such arguments have diffused across political, media, and information ecosystems.

The Persistence and Diffusion of the NATO-Provocation Narrative: From Academic Debate to Popular Realism

Ongoing discussions have shown that the NATO-provocation narrative remains alive, tracing its roots to the early debates of 2014–2015. In late 2025, John Mearsheimer reiterated in a speech at a conference held in the European Parliament that NATO's eastward expansion was a primary cause of the Ukraine conflict and warned of its destabilizing effects on European security. He argued that NATO's advance toward Ukraine's borders heightened Russian insecurity and contributed to the outbreak of the war.[8] In doing so, he reaffirmed his 2014 claim.[9] In numerous public commentaries, realist authors have also described Ukraine's prospects for military success as unrealistic, reiterating that Western strategies, such as military assistance and signals of NATO enlargement, continue to risk escalation.[10]

Across various online platforms and information campaigns, stories circulate that blame NATO expansion and portray Russia's preemptive measures as necessary. Many video and audio channels share podcast clips or interview segments that promote NATO-blame narratives, featuring episodes or recurring

[8] John J. Mearsheimer, "Mearsheimer: Europe's Bleak Future," *The American Conservative*, November 18, 2025, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/mearsheimer-europes-bleak-future/.

[9] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77-127, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault.

[10] Stephen M. Walt, "The Perpetually Irrational Ukraine Debate," *Foreign Policy*, November 29, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/29/the-perpetually-irrational-ukraine-debate/.

themes informed by realist-leaning perspectives.[11] Overall, these narratives closely align with Kremlin propaganda efforts aimed at disseminating specific messages to justify an unprovoked and irrational war.[12]

The popularization of such claims has also shaped broader domestic public discourse, further reinforcing the misattribution of responsibility for the war. As Dutkiewicz and Stecuła demonstrate, opposition to U.S. military assistance to Ukraine has produced an unusual convergence between segments of the American far right and far left, despite their otherwise divergent ideological commitments.[13] While the far right frames aid as an unnecessary entanglement in foreign conflicts and a drain on national resources, elements of the far left portray support for Ukraine as an expression of Western imperialism. As a consequence, pervasive narratives have emerged that displace responsibility for the war away from Russia and toward the United States and NATO. The result is a public narrative in which NATO's role is exaggerated as a causal factor, while the aggressor's strategic choices and revisionist ambitions recede into the background.

Once reified in this manner, such reasoning also becomes politically portable: it is mobilized across ideological divides, stripped of theoretical or factual consistency, and repurposed to justify inaction or accommodation toward an aggressive and revisionist regime that threatens not only Ukraine but also wider European and regional stability.

However, this type of popular realism differs from nuanced academic realism. Although some realists defend a realist explanation of the war by prioritizing security dilemmas, these claims are contested within the discipline of International Relations, with some scholars showing that, even within realism, there are richer, multifactorial explanations that extend beyond NATO causation.[14]

Furthermore, some scholars criticize the resulting conflation of offensive realism with realism more generally. Smith and Dawson argue that, while Mearsheimer's structural realist account foregrounds great-power dynamics, other realist strands, such as classical and neoclassical realism, can offer more nuanced, multivariate explanations by incorporating ideational and psychologi-

[11] For recurring dissemination in public media of arguments that NATO provoked Russia, see, for example, various episodes of *The Scott Horton Show* and the *Provoked* podcast addressing Ukraine and NATO's alleged role in causing the conflict, as well as various video podcast episodes of Tucker Carlson's *The Tucker Carlson Show*, which claim that the West provoked Russia into invading eastern Ukraine by expanding NATO eastward.

[12] EUvsDisinfo, "The Myth That Won't Die: Blaming NATO for Russia's War," April 24, 2025, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-myth-that-wont-die-blaming-nato-for-russias-war/.

[13] Jan Dutkiewicz and Dominik Stecuła, "Why America's Far Right and Far Left Have Aligned Against Helping Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, July 4, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/04/us-politics-ukraine-russia-far-right-left-progressive-horseshoe-theory/.

[14] J Patrick Rhamey, Jr. et al., "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Accounting for the Domestic alongside the International," *International Studies Review* 27, no. 4 (December 2025): viaf023, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaf023.

cal variables alongside power-political incentives. Many scholars suggest that realism as a tradition is analytically richer than its popularized structural form and that relying exclusively on offensive realist explanations of the war risks oversimplifying its causes.[15]

Harald Edinger's analysis of realist explanations for Russia's war against Ukraine further emphasizes the internal variety of assumptions within the realist tradition. He shows that the structural realist account has often been reduced to a simplistic "Western provocation" narrative, while realism encompasses a broader set of theoretical positions—offensive, defensive, and classical—each with distinct assumptions about power, rationality, and state behavior. Edinger highlights the importance of differentiating between the structural incentives facing states and the status-driven and emotional motivations of individual leaders, suggesting that explanations based on Russian security concerns may reflect elite dynamics as much as structural logics.[16]

Taken together, these debates demonstrate that the NATO-provocation narrative has evolved into a durable, publicly circulating interpretive frame that selectively draws on realist concepts while shedding the analytical constraints found in academic scholarship. As some realist arguments move from scholarly debate into media commentary, policy advocacy, propaganda, and populist discourse, they undergo a process of simplification and reification. The result is a script in which NATO expansion becomes a standalone cause and responsibility for the war is systematically displaced away from the aggressor. Recognizing these shortcomings is essential for making sounder policy decisions. The following section therefore turns to the first core pillar of popularized realist claims that Russia was "provoked" into war by NATO, to examine how this argument is constructed, what it omits, and what its most notable empirical and theoretical challenges are.

The "Provocation" Thesis: NATO Expansion and the Reification of Causality

A central claim advanced in popular realist interpretations of Russia's war against Ukraine is that the conflict, while normatively indefensible, was nevertheless provoked by Western actions – most notably NATO enlargement and the EU's eastward engagement. This argument is most prominently associated with John Mearsheimer's claim that the "taproot of the trouble" lies in the West's attempt to move Ukraine and Georgia out of Russia's orbit, particularly following NATO's

[15] Nicholas Ross Smith and Grant Dawson, "Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War," *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 2 (2022): 175-200, https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2023.

[16] Harald Edinger, "Offensive Ideas: Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Putin's War on Ukraine," *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (2022): 1873-1893, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac217.

2008 Bucharest Summit declaration and the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership.[17] In public discourse, this line of reasoning has come to function as a monocausal explanation in which NATO expansion is treated as both a necessary and sufficient condition for Russian aggression.

This interpretation, however, relies on a significant theoretical reification. It abstracts NATO enlargement from the historical, political, and agency-driven processes through which it unfolded and instead treats it as a unilateral Western imposition on European states freed from Soviet control. Such a reading of history overlooks the extent to which NATO and EU enlargement were driven first and foremost by sustained lobbying efforts by Central and Eastern European states themselves. These efforts were motivated by historical experiences of and fears of Russian aggression that predated NATO's post-Cold War enlargement, as well as by acute threat perceptions and the resulting choice to undertake far-reaching democratic reforms in order to become part of the Western institutional space.[18] By framing enlargement as a Western "march eastward," realist accounts marginalize the sovereign agency of states such as Ukraine and Georgia, effectively erasing their rational security choices from the analytical equation.

Ukraine's and Georgia's pursuit of alternative security arrangements followed decades of coercive Russian policies, including occupation, Sovietization, Russification, economic pressure, the manipulation of separatist movements, and the instrumentalization of Russia's great-power status in the region to preclude peaceful coexistence. From the early 1990s onward, Russian involvement in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in eastern Ukraine, demonstrated a consistent pattern of using ethnic divisions as tools of influence, culminating in the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the incursion into Ukraine in 2014. These dynamics are systematically downplayed in popular realist narratives in order to preserve the internal coherence of the provocation thesis.

Historical evidence also shows that NATO expansion alone does not account for Russian threat perceptions. In fact, Russia itself initially expressed interest in NATO membership. At the first meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in December 1991, Russia's representative raised the prospect of NATO membership as a long-term political objective.[19] Then-President Boris Yeltsin's November 1991 letter to President Bush emphasized Russia's commitment to eco-

[17] Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault."

[18] See, for example, Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[19] Thomas L. Friedman, "Soviet Disarray: Yeltsin Says Russia Seeks to Join NATO," *The New York Times*, December 21, 1991, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/21/world/soviet-disarray-yeltsin-says-russia-seeks-to-join-nato.html.

nomic reform, democratic transformation, and reintegration into "world civilization," presenting Russia as a prospective contributor to global stability.[20] These overtures represent a period of relative openness in Russian foreign policy that contradicts the notion of consistent NATO-driven antagonism. On the contrary, they underline the extent to which a leader's choices, actions, and rhetoric can shape state behavior in an anarchic international system.

The subsequent deterioration of Russia's posture toward NATO in the early 1990s reflected not external provocation but domestic political developments. The failure of economic reforms, rising socioeconomic instability, and the resurgence of nationalist and neo-imperialist forces openly nostalgic for the Soviet Union reoriented Russian foreign policy toward revisionism.[21] The 1993 Primakov Report, which made NATO enlargement conditional on changes to the alliance's nature and decision-making processes, marked a return to Cold War-era demands.[22] These shifts underscore that Russian hostility toward NATO was contingent and strategic rather than an automatic response to the alliance's existence, while explicit opposition to enlargement emerged only later. This speaks directly to realist scholars who argue that leaders' choices and domestic circumstances matter and that multiple trajectories of historical development are possible beyond the deterministic logic of offensive realism.

Earlier warnings by figures such as George Kennan and Alexei Arbatov are frequently invoked to support the provocation thesis. Kennan famously described NATO expansion as "the beginning of a new Cold War," predicting adverse Russian reactions.[23] Arbatov similarly cautioned that failure to integrate Russia economically could fuel nationalism and neo-imperialism.[24] Yet popular interpretations selectively extract these warnings while ignoring their conditionality: both arguments presupposed that Russian policy responses would be shaped by Western neglect rather than by enlargement policies.

The historical record also suggests that Russian demands for spheres of influence and neutral buffer zones predate NATO enlargement and have persisted across Russia's ideological transformations, from Stalin's proposals in the early

[20] "Letter from President Yeltsin to President Bush," National Security Archives, November 1991, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB447/1991-11-00%20Letter%20from%20President%20Yeltsin%20to%20President%20Bush.PDF.

[21] Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 30.

[22] Martin A. Smith, *Russia and NATO since 1991: From Cold War through Cold Peace to Partnership?* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 57.

[23] Thomas L. Friedman, "Foreign Affairs; Now a Word from X," *The New York Times*, May 2, 1998, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html.

[24] Georgi Arbatov, "Eurasia Letter: A New Cold War?" *Foreign Policy* 95 (Summer 1994): 90-103.

Cold War to post-Soviet initiatives aimed at diluting NATO's role in Europe.[25] Stalin's and Molotov's proposals essentially advanced the idea of reforming NATO and turning it into a loose talk shop, creating a neutral zone extending from Scandinavia to west-central Europe, and precluding German unification by manipulating the timing of all-German elections.

The Soviet handling of the German Question during the early Cold War underscores the instrumental use of "neutrality" and negotiated settlement as tools of power politics rather than genuine conflict resolution. As Fursenko and Naftali demonstrate, Soviet proposals regarding German reunification, most notably the Stalin Note of 1952, were not designed to stabilize Europe but to prevent West Germany's integration into Western security structures and weaken the emerging Atlantic alliance.[26] Neutrality, in this context, functioned as a means of diluting Western cohesion, constraining U.S. influence, and preserving Soviet leverage over Central Europe. The German Question thus became a bargaining instrument through which Moscow sought to reshape the regional balance of power without relinquishing its own strategic advantages. This logic closely resembles Russia's contemporary approach to Ukraine: calls for neutrality and demilitarization are advanced not as endpoints of a settlement but as mechanisms to compensate for Russia's inability to compete directly with a united Europe.

Historical experience further suggests that Russia's core grievance has not been the existence of a direct military threat from NATO, but rather the presence of a transatlantic defensive alliance in which Russia does not—and the Soviet Union previously did not—occupy a dominant position. The issue has therefore been less about NATO threatening Russia than about Russia seeking to dilute Europe's collective defense arrangements, marginalize U.S. involvement, and gradually expand its own sphere of influence. Russian diplomatic initiatives aimed at reforming, neutralizing, or bypassing NATO have consistently reflected great-power competition.[27] Soviet and later Russian diplomatic proposals repeatedly sought to neutralize NATO, restrict German unification, or impose asymmetric sequencing in security arrangements while simultaneously consolidating control over Eastern Europe.[28] Elections and referenda conducted under

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[25] Günter Bischof and Saki Dockrill, eds., *Cold War Respite: The Geneva Summit of 1955* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

[26] Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary (*New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

[27] Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2011/07/post-imperium-a-eurasian-story; Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[28] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Russian auspices, whether in occupied parts of Georgia and Ukraine or in earlier Soviet-controlled territories, have historically lacked credibility and have been accompanied by ethnic cleansing or population displacement.[29]

Popularized versions of offensive realism fail to recognize this historical pattern. By framing Russian behavior primarily as a defensive reaction to NATO and EU enlargement, such accounts overlook how efforts to weaken Western alliances have unfolded against the backdrop of Soviet and Russian expansionist moves. From this perspective, opposition to NATO enlargement is not a mechanism for preserving threatened security but a strategy for creating permissive conditions under which Russia can incrementally advance its influence, not only in Ukraine and Georgia but across the broader European landscape. The failure to recognize such outcomes as strategic advances for Russia is what invited further Russian action, rather than the open-ended promise of NATO enlargement.

Further weakening the provocation thesis is the empirical record of non-alignment. Ukraine's legally enshrined non-aligned status from 2010 until late 2014 did not prevent Russian interference in Ukraine's sovereign affairs, the annexation of Crimea, or the incitement of separatism in Donbas.[30] Similarly, Armenia's prolonged bandwagoning with Russia failed to secure meaningful protection during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, and Georgia's restraint in the early 1990s did not prevent Russian-backed separatism, well before NATO integration became a policy goal for Georgia.[31] These cases demonstrate that abstention from NATO was neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for the security of these countries. From a strict offensive realist perspective, countries

[29] Ethnic cleansing took place in Abkhazia, Georgia, in 1992–1993. See the Budapest Summit Declaration, CSCE Budapest Document 1994, "Towards a Genuine Partnership in a New Era," adopted at the Fourth CSCE Summit of Heads of State or Government, Budapest, December 5–6, 1994, https://www.osce.org/mc/39554. Ethnic cleansing took place also during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. See, for example, "Ethnic Cleansing of Georgians Resulted from Russian Invasion and Occupation since August 8, 2008," submitted by Georgia's Ministry of Justice, HDIM.DEL/320/08, October 6, 2008, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/b/34091.pdf. The persecution of Crimean Tatars took place following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. See Elmira Bayrasli, "Who Will Speak for the Tatars?" *Foreign Policy*, May 18, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/18/crimean-tatars-ethnic-cleansing/. See also "UN General Assembly Passes Georgia IDP Resolution," *Civil.ge*, June 9, 2022, https://civil.ge/archives/495222.

[30] Daniel Schearf, "Ukraine Formally Scraps Non-aligned Status," *VOA News*, December 29, 2014, https://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-poroshenko-non-aligned-status/2578011.html.

[31] Fiona Hill and Pamela Jewett, "'Back in the USSR': Russia's Intervention in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for United States Policy Toward Russia," The Ethnic Conflict Project, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 1994, www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/back-in-the-ussr-1994.pdf; Knar Khudoyan and Constance Léon, "What Russia-Ukraine War Means for Disputed Nagorno-Karabakh Territory," *Open Democracy*, April 22, 2022, www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-ukraine-nagorno-karabakh-armenia-azerbaijan-yerevan/.

such as Ukraine and Georgia, as well as others in Russia's near abroad, would remain vulnerable to Russian domination, since a great power is expected to advance wherever opportunities for power maximization present themselves.[32] However, such reasoning risks reifying structural incentives and overlooking how alliances, deterrence, and sequencing choices can meaningfully alter the costs and feasibility of revisionist behavior.[33] Because realism permits strategic choices designed to avoid unnecessary wars, it is difficult to reconcile the theory with strategies that systematically undermine state sovereignty and expose societies to mass violence, as Ukraine and Georgia have already experienced under Soviet and Russian tutelage. Reifying such outcomes as structurally inevitable abandons realism's concern with prudence and cost minimization and privileges power maximization over deterrence strategies that could preserve both order and human life.

The central issue is not Europe's defensive institutional architecture but the balance of power. From this perspective, it is analytically puzzling that offensive realism, ostensibly concerned with power maximization and strategic advantage, would endorse positions that weaken Western power and reduce deterrence against a revisionist challenger. Other realist strands argue that Putin's decisions should not be treated as teleologically embedded in the structure of the international system, but rather as contingent outcomes shaped by this leader's choices and the corresponding domestic environment.[34]

Taken together, these patterns reveal that the popular realist thesis of NATO provocation depends on isolating the argument about NATO enlargement from a broader historical context in which Russian revisionism, coercive diplomacy, and disregard for neighboring states' sovereignty have played decisive roles. By reifying NATO expansion as a standalone cause, these arguments misattribute responsibility for the war and obscure the agency of both Russia and the states subjected to its pressure.

Military Aid, Escalation, and Neutralization Arguments: The Reification of Risk

A second pillar of popular realist argumentation holds that Western military assistance to Ukraine exacerbates suffering, prolongs the war, and risks catastrophic escalation, including the potential use of nuclear weapons.[35] This position has been reiterated in opposition to arming Ukraine both before and after

[32] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

[33] Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[34] Rhamey, Jr. et al., "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine"; Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[35] Walt, "The Perpetually Irrational Ukraine Debate."

Russia's full-scale invasion, with claims that restraint and early negotiations—leading to Ukraine's virtual capitulation to Russian demands—would minimize costs and stabilize the security environment.[36]

These arguments, however, rely on a reified conception of the risk of escalation. Escalation is treated as an abstract, ever-present danger detached from force balances, learning effects, and prior deterrence failures. Yet Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 was triggered by perceptions of Ukrainian weakness and Western reluctance to impose meaningful costs following earlier acts of aggression against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The expectation of a rapid military victory and regime change reflected not excessive but insufficient deterrence. From this perspective, escalation was not the result of Western military assistance but rather the consequence of prolonged Western hesitation dictated by preemptive caution.[37]

This emphasis on the need for sufficient deterrence aligns with realist arguments made in the early 1990s, when Mearsheimer asserted that Ukraine could not defend itself against a nuclear-armed Russia without a nuclear deterrent and that Ukrainian nuclear weapons constituted the only reliable safeguard against Russian aggression.[38] If deterrence logic were applied consistently, one would expect sustained support for security guarantees or military assistance to Ukraine aimed at increasing the expected costs of aggression, in line with defensive realist arguments emphasizing that revisionist behavior is not inevitable.[39] The subsequent battlefield performance of a better-armed Ukraine, which forced Russian withdrawals from northern and southern regions, lends empirical support to deterrence-based reasoning.[40] These outcomes highlight a key inconsistency within popular realist discourse: deterrence is invoked selectively, often to oppose military aid rather than to evaluate its preventive effects.

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[36] Stephen M. Walt, "Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea," *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/how-not-to-save-ukraine-arming-kiev-is-a-bad-idea/.

[37] Liam Collins and Frank Sobchak, "U.S. Deterrence Failed in Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, February 20, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/20/ukraine-deterrence-failed-putin-invasion/; William Maley, "Ukraine, Afghanistan and the Failure of Deterrence," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 4 (2023): 407-414, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2219628; Lawrence Freedman, "The Russo-Ukrainian War and the Durability of Deterrence," *Survival* 65, no. 6 (2023): 7-36, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2285598.

[38] John J. Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 50-66, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/1993-06-01/case-ukrainian-nuclear-deterrent.

[39] Stephen van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 5-43, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.22.4.5; Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*.

[40] For the Russian withdrawal from northern Ukraine, see Frederick W. Kagan, George Barros, and Karolina Hird, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 3," Institute for the Study of War, April 3, 2022, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-3. For the Russian withdrawal from Kherson,

Claims that continued support risks nuclear escalation have also become increasingly unfalsifiable. As articulated in late 2022, arguments conceding that hawks may be right while maintaining that escalation could still occur are so open-ended that any outcome can be retroactively interpreted as validation.[41] Escalation risk should not be decoupled from observable indicators and learning processes; otherwise, it becomes a rhetorical device resistant to revision, even when the evidence suggests otherwise. This exemplifies theory reification, which, when translated into policy, can lead to flawed risk assessments.

Closely linked to catastrophic escalation arguments are realist policy prescriptions for early negotiations that entail territorial concessions and Ukrainian neutrality. These appeals are often framed as pragmatic efforts to limit costs and achieve a mutually tolerable settlement, even if such outcomes fall short of justice and could set a dangerous precedent, encouraging the aggrandizement of dictators worldwide.[42]

Such deterministic arguments disregard the empirical record of similar historical and contemporary negotiations with Russia. The failure of the Minsk I (2014) and Minsk II (2015) agreements was not primarily the result of insufficient Western pressure on Ukraine but rather of Russia's persistent obstruction on core issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity.[43] Russia's insistence on political concessions before meaningful security guarantees mirrored earlier Soviet negotiating tactics during the German unification process, in which procedural disputes over sequencing, such as the timing of elections, were used to entrench asymmetric leverage. In the case of German unification, the Soviet Union demanded that elections be held prior to unification as a precondition. Western negotiators understood that elections conducted partly under Soviet control would produce a predetermined outcome. As a result, Soviet tactics left the issue of German unification unresolved until the fall of the Berlin Wall altered the underlying balance of power.[44]

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see Karolina Hird et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 11," Institute for the Study of War, November 11, 2022, www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-11; UK MODinistry of Defence, Defence Intelligence update, November 12, 2022, quoted in "UK: Russian Withdrawal From Kherson Shows Difficulties Forces Face," *VOA News*, November 12, 2022, www.voanews.com/a/russian-withdrawal-from-kherson-called-recognition-of-difficulties-faced-by-forces/6831483.html.

41 Walt, "The Perpetually Irrational Ukraine Debate."

42 Stephen M. Walt, "Why Wars Are Easy to Start and Hard to End," *Foreign Policy*, August 29, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/29/war-military-quagmire-russia-ukraine/; Stephen M. Walt, "The Realist Case for a Ukraine Peace Deal," *Foreign Policy*, March 29, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/29/realist-case-ukraine-peace-deal/.

43 Anna Batta, "Roadblocks to Peace in Russia's War in Ukraine," *Orbis* 68, no. 4 (2024): 666-676, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2024.09.010.

44 Bischof and Dockrill, eds., *Cold War Respite.*

A comparable logic was embedded in the implementation provisions of Minsk II, which sought to institutionalize persistent pressure points against Ukraine's political stability and sovereignty. By conditioning security measures on prior political concessions, the agreement created a pathway toward *de facto* and, eventually, *de jure* separatism when this suited Russian strategic objectives. The subsequent passportization of Ukrainian citizens in the Donbas and Russia's recognition of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" in February 2022 conclusively foreclosed the possibility of good-faith bargaining.[45]

During the initial phase of the invasion, Russian offers to negotiate were accompanied by demands tantamount to capitulation. Although Ukraine engaged in talks under extreme military pressure, including meetings in Gomel, Ankara, and Istanbul, its most far-reaching proposal—permanent neutrality in exchange for security guarantees and deferred negotiations over Crimea—was still rejected by Russia.[46] The exposure of mass atrocities in Bucha and Irpin fundamentally altered the strategic and moral landscape, reinforcing the conclusion that negotiations in the absence of credible deterrence were untenable.[47] Subsequent Western coordination through the Ramstein format reflected the recognition that military assistance was a prerequisite for meaningful diplomacy, not an obstacle to it.[48] Despite ongoing Ukrainian peace initiatives, including the 2022 G20 peace plan, Russia has consistently reaffirmed maximalist demands centered on "denazification" and "demilitarization," thereby foreclosing compromise.[49]

It is notable that Russia's December 2021 draft ultimatums to the United States and NATO closely echoed earlier initiatives, including the 2009 Medvedev proposal for a new European security architecture and similar Cold War-era initiatives by the Soviet Union. These initiatives did not seek compromise but rather the formalization of spheres of influence and the exclusion of Ukraine and Georgia from European security arrangements. Notably, the Stalin-era proposals, the Medvedev initiative, and the 2021 Putin demands were never primarily about

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[45] Fabian Burkhardt, "Russia's 'Passportisation' of the Donbas: The Mass Naturalisation of Ukrainians Is More Than a Foreign Policy Tool," SWP Comment, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 3, 2020, https://doi.org/10.18449/2020C41.

[46] Tuvan Gumrukcu and Ece Toksabay, "No Progress on Ukraine Ceasefire in Lavrov-Kuleba Meeting," *Reuters*, March 10, 2022, www.reuters.com/world/europe/top-russian-ukrainian-diplomats-meet-first-time-since-invasion-2022-03-10/.

[47] James Politi, "Zelensky Tells UN That Russia Must Be 'Brought to Justice' over Atrocities," *Financial Times*, April 5, 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/57430013-3b96-4f97-9f47-daaeed1c58d5.

[48] Alexandra Brzozowski, "Ramstein Meeting Gives Birth to Global 'Contact Group' to Support Ukraine," *Euractiv*, April 27, 2022, www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/ramstein-meeting-gives-birth-to-global-contact-group-to-support-ukraine/.

[49] "Russia's Lavrov Issues Ultimatum to Ukraine: 'For Your Own Good,'" *Al Jazeera*, December 27, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/27/russias-lavrov-issues-ultimatum-to-ukraine-for-your-own-good.

enlargement per se but about reshaping the balance of power in Europe and securing a more favorable position through diplomatic maneuvering. Such strategies reflect a pattern of soft balancing, whereby a materially weaker power seeks to constrain a dominant actor through institutional, legal, and procedural means rather than through overt power-based competition.[50] Soft balancing is generally understood as a weak substitute for hard balancing, adopted when confrontation is either infeasible or too costly, and is rarely sufficient. Interpreting and popularizing Russia's soft-balancing efforts, such as institutional maneuvering and maximalist diplomatic initiatives, as decisive strategic responses further illustrate the prevalence of reified realist interpretations of escalation.

Proposals for Ukrainian neutrality face a well-established credible commitment problem.[51] Even if both parties were willing to negotiate a settlement, the durability of neutrality would depend on credible enforcement mechanisms capable of assuring compliance over time. The repeated failure of previous agreements and security assurances, including the Budapest Memorandum and the Minsk process, raises questions regarding the long-term viability of such arrangements. Bargaining theory suggests that negotiated settlements can fail because of credible-commitment problems,[52] while the repeated failure of security assurances and negotiated arrangements in the post-Soviet space illustrates the practical difficulty of enforcing neutrality guarantees.

Taken together, popularized realist arguments opposing military aid and advocating early negotiations illustrate how reified assumptions about escalation and bargaining obscure actor preferences, learning dynamics, and historical experience. By disregarding these factors, such arguments misattribute responsibility for prolonging the war and shift attention away from the aggressor's strategic choices.

The Core Mechanism: Reification, Sovereign Agency, and the Misattribution of Responsibility

The convergence between popular realist narratives and Kremlin justifications ultimately rests on a shared tendency to marginalize the sovereign agency of the actors involved. As small and medium-sized states are often treated as passive objects of great-power competition, their preferences and security concerns are subordinated to systemic considerations of power maximization. This analytical stance facilitates the displacement of responsibility for war from the aggressor to the broader security environment, particularly NATO.

Offensive realist extrapolations have proven especially prone to this tendency. By privileging competition among near-hegemonic powers, most notably

[50] Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 7-45, https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894607.

[51] James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 379-414, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033324.

[52] Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," 401-409.

the United States and China, these extrapolations portray the allocation of resources in support of Ukraine as strategically wasteful and as diverting attention from an assumed primary contest. Within this framework, the defense of Ukraine against a mid-level power such as Russia appears myopic, as it allegedly undermines long-term great-power positioning.[53] Yet this reasoning rests on the analytical exclusion of Ukraine's agency and a disregard for the immediate threat environment shaping European security.

Evaluated on realism's own terms, this exclusion is difficult to justify. Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory emphasizes that states balance not only against raw power but also against proximity, intentions, and perceived aggressiveness.[54] From this perspective, Russia's increasingly hostile rhetoric and actions, culminating in Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, which denounced perceived U.S. unipolarity and framed NATO's existence as a provocation, constituted clear signals of threatening intent.[55]

Contrary to claims that NATO expansion provoked Russian aggression, it is more consistent with balance-of-threat logic to interpret NATO enlargement as a response to Russian behavior rather than as its cause. While China represents a significant long-term competitor to the United States, it has not exhibited the same pattern of overt military aggression against European neighbors. According to Walt's analysis, an imbalance of threat arises when one actor's intentions and proximity render it more immediately dangerous than others.[56] In this context, European states' security policies reflect rational responses to Russian threats rather than Western manipulation and coercion aimed at expanding NATO. It was not only Georgia and Ukraine that were threatened in 2008 and 2014; other Central and Eastern European countries, as well as the Alliance as a whole, perceived a threat from Russia's revisionist leadership.[57]

Moreover, the claim that NATO enlargement undermines U.S. strategic competition with China overlooks a critical counterargument: the consolidation of

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[53] Miriam Fendius Elman, "The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard," *British Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 2 (1995), https://ideas.repec.org/a/cup/bjposi/v25y1995i02p171-217_00.html.

[54] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[55] "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," President of Russia, February 10, 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034.

[56] Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 265.

[57] *National Security Strategy of The Republic of Poland 2020* (Warsaw: Government of the Republic of Poland, 2020), https://en.bbn.gov.pl/en/about-bbn/publications/publications/769,National-Security-Strategy-of-the-Republic-of-Poland.html; *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania*, 2017, English translation, CCDCOE Strategy & Governance library, https://ccdcoe.org/library/strategy-and-governance/?region=europe; "Warsaw Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016," NATO, July 9, 2016, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2016/07/09/warsaw-summit-communique.

Russian dominance over Central and Eastern Europe would have significantly augmented Russia's power capabilities and bargaining leverage vis-à-vis both Europe and the United States. Historically, Russian efforts to weaken NATO have persisted regardless of ideological orientation, from Soviet proposals in the 1950s to post-Soviet initiatives in 2009 and 2021.[58] This continuity suggests that opposition to NATO expansion is rooted not in security dilemmas but in revisionist ambitions.[59]

Notably, pathbreaking realist theory does not support dismissing sovereignty on the basis of state size. Kenneth Waltz explicitly defined sovereignty as the capacity of states to decide how to address internal and external challenges, including whether to seek alliances and accept constraints on autonomy.[60] When popular realist arguments treat the sovereignty of states such as Ukraine as expendable or negotiable, they depart from realism's own conceptual foundations, stripping the theory of its internal coherence.

A foundational realist work, *The Peloponnesian War*, illustrates that medium-sized and small powers play decisive roles in shaping the trajectory of great-power conflict. Smaller city-states such as Corinth, Megara, and Corcyra were not merely passive objects of Athenian-Spartan rivalry but active participants whose alliance choices, pressures, and grievances structured escalation dynamics. While structural realists warn that Ukraine risks becoming a modern analog of Corinth, entangling the United States in a great-power rivalry, the Peloponnesian War suggests a more complex lesson. In Thucydidean terms, Corinth mattered because it exposed Sparta's indecision, Megara because economic coercion escalated grievances, and Melos because neutrality without an alliance invited annihilation.[61] Sovereignty matters, and even weaker states retain agency in alliance formation and strategic choice.

In this sense, blaming NATO for Russia's war in Ukraine is not the product of realist theory per se but of its instrumentalized application. By erasing sovereign agency and reifying selective assumptions, popular realist narratives align with Kremlin discourse, obscuring the true causes and consequences of aggression.

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[58] Bobo Lo, "Medvedev and the New European Security Architecture," Policy Brief (London: Centre for European Reform, 2009), www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/pbrief_medvedev_july09-741.pdf.

[59] Michael McFaul, Stephen Sestanovich, and John Mearsheimer, "Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?" *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2014): 167-178, www.foreignaffairs.com/responses/faulty-powers.

[60] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 79.

[61] Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian* War (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969); Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Conclusion

The central finding in this article is that blaming NATO for Russia's war represents a reified application of selected theoretical claims that isolates the process of NATO expansion from its historical sequence, marginalizes sovereign agency, and mutes internal theoretical tensions. A further finding is that such an application of theoretical claims enables shifting responsibility away from the aggressor, producing structural abstractions that obscure the causes of deliberate acts of aggression while also converging with Kremlin narratives that emphasize the thesis of NATO "provocation."

By tracing how the three dominant popularized realist claims—the provocation thesis, opposition to military assistance, and advocacy of neutrality—weaken when pertinent arguments are reintroduced, the article shows that these explanations depend on analytically fragile assumptions. They discount Russian intentions, learning effects, and prior behavior; treat escalation as an unfalsifiable possibility rather than a contingent process; and assume bargaining conditions that are contradicted by empirical experience. Most importantly, they erase the sovereign agency of small and medium-sized states, treating them as passive objects of great-power competition rather than as actors that respond rationally to perceived threats and whose choices affect regional power dynamics.

Ultimately, this article does not argue that Western policies were beyond criticism or that structural constraints are irrelevant. Rather, it demonstrates why attributing Russia's war in Ukraine to NATO is analytically flawed, theoretically incomplete, and politically consequential. By restoring agency, context, and theoretical range, international relations scholarship can better fulfill its explanatory role without becoming complicit in narratives that shift responsibility away from those who make irrational and costly foreign policy choices.

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