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The Russia-Ukraine Conflict: A Tri-Theoretical Analysis of Geopolitical Dynamics

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Abstract:

The Russia-Ukraine war has tremendously impacted the whole world, either directly or indirectly. It has challenged Putin's military and political prowess while also highlighting Ukrainian resilience and perseverance. This paper aims to provide a succinct and thorough understanding of the happenings there through some very important international theories which some modern scholars might consider outdated. Nonetheless, these theories provide a concise framework about the factors behind them. Moreover, the paper explores the motivations and strategies of key actors involved, shedding light on how these theories help explain their actions, choices, and the broader implications for international relations. By revisiting these theoretical perspectives, the paper highlights their enduring relevance in analyzing the current geopolitical landscape and provides insights into the potential future course of the conflict and its global repercussions. The paper also examines the war's impact on trade, psychology and livelihoods of common people and how it has made an entire generation of children completely and utterly displaced and deprived of a stable future.

Keywords: conflict analysis, constructivism, global impact, global security, international theories, liberalism, nation-states, political resilience, realism, sovereignty, war.

1.0 Introduction:

On Thursday 24 February, 2022 President Putin authorised airstrikes across Ukraine and ordered his troops to march into the country. Russian forces began military and artillery attacks, striking major Ukrainian cities including the capital city, Kyiv. A trace of North Korean soldiers was found in the Kursk region of Russia, combating the rival Ukrainian forces, in response to which United States's then president Joe Biden gave Ukraine the green light to use long-range (300 km/ 200 miles) ATACMS missiles to strike inside Russia. Ukraine conflict: Your guide to understanding the story. (2022, February 25). Bbc.

Such developments in the world, events of cooperation, counter-action, and violation are significant to understanding and assessing the positions of countries concerning their power dynamics in international relations. However, none of these can be recognized without having a thorough appreciation of classical international theories namely, Realism, Liberalism & Constructivism. This paper aims to examine how these classical theories can illuminate the dynamics of these global challenges. By analyzing the geopolitical implications of the Russia-Ukraine war and the international response to climate change among other consequential events, this paper seeks to assess the relevance and limitations of these theories in the 21st century. In doing so, it will contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving international system. These political theories provide a loose framework that makes it easier to examine and analyze the events in a global economy such as ours.

2.0 Various theories of international relations:

The classical theories of international relations are used to explain and justify international politics and the current global system and are seen to constitute the different schools of thought in the discipline. Three primary ways in which classical texts are utilized in contemporary International Relations can be identified as follows:

Firstly, classical authors are frequently used as precursors to contemporary theoretical approaches: Realists trace the roots of their thinking back to Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau; Liberals most prominently refer to Kant; the English School to Grotius; Marxist approaches identify Marx as well as Gramsci; and Nietzsche as well as Hegel play an important role in Postmodernism.

Secondly, classical authors are employed to explain contemporary political events and to support or even promote certain foreign policies. A notable example is the influential academic and political use of Kant to explain the Democratic Peace theory, which implicitly or explicitly advocates for the spread of democracy and market economies, alongside a strict division between liberal and non-liberal states in today's global politics.

Finally, classical authors play a key role in shaping and framing current theoretical and political discussions. In mainstream International Relations, theoretical debates are often presented as Liberal or Kantian approaches versus Realist or Hobbesian/Machiavellian views, while alternative perspectives, such as Marxist versus Realist approaches, emerge from the margins. Likewise,

contemporary political ideologies and policies are often defined by reference to classical authors and contrasted with each other. For example, Robert Kagan recently described the European perspective on international relations as "Kantian" and the American viewpoint as "Hobbesian." (Jahn, n.d.)

Below are some theories being discussed in detail:

2.1 Realism:

The theory of realism is considered one of the most eloquent theories of international relations. It became the principal guiding factor in explaining the events of World War two substituting doctrines of idealism and providing a more comprehensive and explanatory cause of war in an otherwise anarchic world. Realism constitutes a wide range of approaches and schools of thought based on their explanation for the causes of war, mainly: classical realism, modern realism (twentieth-century realism), neo-realism, and neo-classical realism. (Lomia, 2020, p. 592)

Realism seeks to ground itself with majorly 3 guiding principles:

1. Men are self-interested and seek power above everything.
2. Ideals and morality are counterproductive in geopolitics.
3. Man's natural state is lawless anarchy.

Hence, realism promotes the idea that nation-states are the primary actors in the unfolding of international relations. Other characters exist as well - individual people and businesses, in particular - but they have controlled power when it comes to the greater scheme of things. In times of war, states will speak and act as one with their national interests in mind exerting their power over weaker states due to their inherent nature of greed and selfishness, whilst increasing their defense and military power, and economic status without a care for what is right or wrong.

2.2 Idealism / Liberalism:

Idealism is in direct contrast to realism wherein it promotes the belief that international relations should be governed by a system of moral and ethical principles. It perpetuates the idea that all human beings have certain universal principles and rules that they abide by, something that helps them govern their life. Such principles are the cornerstones of idealism. Values like peace, prosperity, justice, and order should be upheld in all cases, especially with anarchic forces around. Idealism has played a crucial role in shaping international relations, particularly in the creation of

international institutions and norms, including the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Idealists typically support the use of diplomacy and international law to resolve global conflicts and challenges, as well as the promotion of international collaboration on issues like development, human rights, and the environment. However, it has been criticized for some of its potentially naive and unrealistic approaches in relation to the global order instead of strategic and military considerations.

2.3 Constructivism:

Constructivism's arrival in international politics is often associated with the end of the Cold War (1947-1991) which the traditional theories of realism and idealism failed to account for. Constructivism sees the world as socially constructed which shapes and reshapes the very nature of international relations through people's actions and behavior. Constructivists argue that states can have varied identities that are socially constructed through interaction with other actors/nation-states. For example: a larger state would focus more on its international standing and recognition while a smaller state would rather prioritise its sustenance and survival. That's one of the primary reasons why despite being a decent economic power Germany didn't become a militarily strong power in the second half of the twentieth century. Its goal pivoted from one of war-oriented politics towards pacifism due to historical circumstances. Furthermore, social norms are also a central part of constructivism. There are primarily 3 kinds of norms:

1. Regulative norm order, regulate and constrain behavior.
2. Constitutive norms create new actors & characters, interests or categories of action;
3. Prescriptive norms prescribe and create new norms meaning there aren't any bad norms when it comes to promoting and advocating for them.

A norm only becomes an expected behavior when a mass of people or principal actors accept and internalize it. For example: constructivists would argue that a lot of climate change mitigation policies have come to the forefront since citizens expect their leaders to adhere to their wishes and commands and do what's best for humanity's survival in the foreseeable future. Liberals, on the other hand, might favor economic growth more while realists might reject the new laws and motions because of the potential damage climate change politics might do to short-term national policies. Hence, constructivism is loosely a structure formed on the wishes of common and influential citizens which continues to shape international politics. (Theys, 2018)

In this complex world order, no one theory can systematically elucidate the situation of international politics and hence, it's important to examine all the possible theories with their potential outcomes and dangers with regards to what's happening in the global system.

3.0 Historical background on Russia & Ukraine:

The relationship between Russia and Ukraine goes as far as the settlement of the first Slavic states when Kyiv was at the heart of Kyivan Rus state. Between the 8th and 11th centuries, nordic traders sailed the river from the Baltic to the Black Sea and settled on the shore. These traders came to be known as Rus which means men who row, since they were so closely associated with the river routes and the ships. Procreating with Slavic, Baltic, and Finnic Tribes, they came to be known as Kyivan Rus. (Lewis, n.d.) Due to its strategic and cultural significance, Kyiv has been a matter of dispute between both Eastern and Western superpowers throughout history. One such instance was the Mongol War of 1240. The Mongol invasion had two major consequences:

1. Shift from power from Kyiv to Moscow
2. Fragmentation of Kyivan Rus into three states - modern-day, Russia, Ukraine & Belarus.

In the 14th century, Kyiv and its surrounding area came under the control of the powerful and expanding grand duchy of Lithuania, and in 1569 the city of Kyiv became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Commonwealth was a union of two states: Poland's Kingdom and Lithuania's Grand Duchy, and Kyiv served as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's capital. Another significant development was when Russia seized Ukraine in 1783, and Crimea became a part of the Russian empire, which lasted until 1954 when the Soviet government moved Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. This territorial transfer resulted in the addition of more Russians to an already established and growing community in Ukraine, which continued to expand further as well. From 1959 to 1989, the ethnic Russian population grew annually by 9.1 percent, going on to make up 22% of Ukraine's population and by 2001, ethnic Russians numbered about 3 million people. While it seemed insignificant during the Soviet era, it laid the foundations for what would happen years later. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, the two constituent entities of Russia and Ukraine became sovereign states, and questions were raised on the subject of Crimea's status and the status and well being of the ethnic Russian community in Ukraine. This began to escalate even more in 2014 when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and his pro-Russian government were

overthrown through a popular uprising which came to be later known as the Orange Revolution since the opposite party's manifesto color was Orange. In the subsequent unrest that followed, ethnic Russians began to revolt and form separatist movements, resulting in Crimea's unilateral detachment from Ukraine while in the eastern territories of Luhansk and Donetsk in the Donbas region, armed conflicts erupted between pro-Russian rebel groups and Ukrainian forces, leading to the armed groups taking control of the territory and also declaring independence from Ukraine. The Russian government backed these separatist movements, even going so far as to deploy its forces, justifying it as a means of safeguarding the security and rights of ethnic Russians. It is speculated that Putin's involvement and desire for an expansionist Russia having definite control over Ukraine whether directly or by installing a pro-Russian regime, made the war unavoidable. (Mataiciwa, 2022)

4.0 Analysing Russia-Ukraine war through classical international relations theories:

4.1 Realism:

John J. Mearsheimer has proven to be one of the most prominent advocates of realism in the 21st century as well as a significant figure to explain and support Ukraine in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis. Realism as a theory primarily signifies that in an anarchic global order, states will be forced to use arms and expansionist policies for their own survival. In the international anarchical system, no state can rely on others, and they have to secure their own survival through a self-help system by acquiring more power. This circumstance of international anarchy compels nations, particularly great powers, to aspire for power and care much about their survival and security. Unfortunately, these worries can lead nations to commit sinful atrocities. In his paper, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault", Mearsheimer underlines three major reasons how liberal values and the West's influence provoked Putin to take such drastic measures. He says NATO's growing eastward policies, EU expansion to assimilate Ukraine economically, and promoting democracy especially by toppling regimes and installing pro-west leaders, all of these reasons instigated Russia to invade its neighbor in a final attempt to save face and maintain the status quo before 2014 (before Orange Revolution). Ukraine is of highly strategic importance to Russia not only because of its geographical location but also because of the close ethnic ties, especially in the eastern part of Ukraine – the Donbas region.

The West's main aim to peel Ukraine away from Russia and integrate it with the Western world generated a security dilemma in Russia. The slow and gradual expansion of Western liberal values towards the erstwhile USSR countries, especially towards Georgia and Ukraine, led to Russia's security dilemma. As a result, Russia invaded Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2022 Simultaneously. Even with previous NATO enlargement of the Baltic countries Russia has been outspoken regarding its inherently deceiving nature and Russian president Yeltsin has gone on to say, as paraphrased, that this is a direct form of war against Russia and if it continues Russia will give a fitting answer. The Russian move has somewhat worked since after the invasion, NATO seems apprehensive about extending a membership invite to Ukraine and the West has also grown more cautious of taking any sudden, impulsive steps. The Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky even admitted that Ukraine will no longer seek membership in the organization. (Ukraine Will Not Join Nato, Says Zelenskiy, as Shelling of Kyiv Continues, n.d.) This is because if Ukraine is allowed to join while the conflict is ongoing, then by virtue of its membership, NATO would have to defend Ukraine and upon doing so, come into direct conflict with Russia, which is something that might escalate into an out and out war with and disrupt the entire global system. Thus for Russia, taking this chance to invade Ukraine was their best path to stall NATO's expansion and maintain the balance of power, which is a reflection of defensive realism. The only thing that would pacify Russia at the very least is to go back to the status quo before 2014, and still possess the kind of influence it did on not only the eastern part but the western and more democracy-inclined parts of Ukraine as well.

4.2 Liberalism:

Liberalism is based on the ideas of inclusion, promotion of democracy, individual freedom, equality, protection of human rights, free markets, international institutions, cooperative security, and principles of progressive change. Liberals believe that the ideal world will be when there's shared prosperity through interdependence between states, promotion of democracy, and globalization dominating at its core. Liberal scholars believe Russia's compromised foreign policy and the weak internal authoritative regime are the main causes of the Russia-Ukraine conflict rather than the reasons listed by the realist thinkers. To wage war against a sovereign nation-state is unthinkable and completely disrespects and threatens not only the current world order but also the

principles on which it's built. Major global powers have imposed harsh economic sanctions on Russia to provide a deterrent to its current foreign policy regarding Ukraine as well.

4.3 Constructivism:

As stated above, constructivism is defined as largely, a social construction of reality where intersubjective meanings determine state decision-making trajectory. Identities are fickle and they can change over time depending on the vested interests of the nation-states which would further polish and determine a framework of national and international security. To understand this constructivist relation, an explanation is given below:

Firstly, the unfair NATO expansionist policies towards the East and its impact on current policies have been detrimental. It began at the end of the Cold War when Mikhail Gorbachev (president of the Soviet Union) surrendered the Soviet control of East Germany and accepted the unification of Germany. This was done in exchange for what he hoped would be the respect of the Soviet sphere of influence and the termination of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) advance eastward. Despite the agreement, the Russians later witnessed the expansion of the Western alliance east toward Moscow (Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault"). Whether the West purposefully misled the Russian leader or Gorbachev misinterpreted the agreement, the nature of the broken or misunderstood contract bears less importance than the perception of intention. This led to an important loss of influence as well as bitterness toward Western societies. Moreover, historically Crimea was part of Russia from 1783 until 1954 when it was transferred over to Ukraine, which angered many Russians. These reasons explain why Russian President Vladimir Putin had no trouble framing the entry of Western economic and military values as a threat to Russian interest in eastern Ukraine. Decades of profound resentment towards the Western world and its ideologies as well as a sentimental attachment to eastern Ukraine resulted in Russia's identity being shaped in fear of growing Western influence, especially near their border.

Secondly, the shared identity of sovereignty has forced Western powers to shape their identities as protecting a democratic regime from autocratic and invasive powers. This has resulted in a lot of economic sanctions being imposed on Russia by all the major world powers.

Lastly, the internal struggle in Ukraine between its western and eastern parts has also proven to be quite difficult and tricky to deal with. The majority of people in the western part want to be

integrated into the promised ideals of democracy and concepts of liberalism and shared prosperity with the West while in the eastern part, the separatists and pro-Russian movements are in full swing. (Rossi, 2024)

These different identities of so many actors provide useful insight into the current Ukrainian crisis.

5.0 The war's impact on:

5.1 Trade:

1. Ukraine plays a crucial role in international markets, particularly in the export of corn, sunflower oil and seeds, barley, wheat, and colza seeds. However, Russia's blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports led to higher food prices and disrupted food commodity supply chains, preventing Ukraine from fully utilizing its export potential. According to preliminary calculations by UNCTAD, the war-induced price increases would impact over 5% of the import basket for the world's poorest countries. In response, the WFP reached 83 million people in the first quarter of 2022, just 55% of its annual target. Consequently, addressing food insecurity and exempting WFP purchases from trade restrictions were key outcomes of the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference in June. By August 26, Ukraine had exported approximately 3.4 million tonnes of crops in the 2022/2023 period, including 937,000 tonnes of wheat, 2.18 million tonnes of corn, and 274,000 tonnes of barley. August exports accounted for half of this total, representing 48.6% of the country's grain exports compared to the same period in 2021/2022 (Kryvetska, n.d.).
2. As major suppliers of both energy and fertilizer commodities, Russia's conflict with Ukraine has disrupted supply chains for both developing and developed nations. One significant shift has been Europe's move away from reliance on Russian gas. Antony Froggatt, deputy director of the Chatham House Environment and Society program, states, "Europe will never return to meaningful dependency on Russian fossil fuels." Even if the war were to end immediately, the trust between European consumers and their primary supplier has been broken. In response to this disruption, Europe has sought alternative gas sources and accelerated its transition to renewable energy. Before 2022, the EU aimed to reduce emissions by 40% and achieve 32% renewables. However, the war has prompted

these targets to be increased to 57% and 45%, respectively (Seven Ways Russia's War on Ukraine Has Changed the World, n.d.).

3. The global demand for secure access to materials and advanced equipment, such as neon, nickel, palladium, and semiconductors, is expected to grow, intensifying competition among nations and companies. The World Bank estimates that the surge in energy prices due to the war could reduce global output by 0.8% over the next two years, with sectors like food, construction, petrochemicals, and transport being most affected. Russia began increasing natural gas prices for the European Union in the latter half of 2021, and prices are expected to keep rising as long as the war continues. In July, the European Commission introduced a Safe Gas for a Safe Winter plan, urging EU members to cut gas demand by 15% over eight months starting August 1. Although the plan is not mandatory, it has sparked debates within the EU on whether it will be sufficient for the winter ahead (Kryvetska, n.d.-b).

5.2 Lives and livelihood:

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is going to enter its third year. It has exacted a terrible human cost, left millions of civilians without a home safe shelter, or medical facilities, and continues to do so. It's not only a human rights violation but also a breach of justice, dignity, and equality that undermines the values of a fair and compassionate society. "Russia's full-scale armed attack on Ukraine, which is about to enter its third year with no end in sight, continues to cause serious and widespread human rights violations, destroying lives and livelihoods," UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk said. (UKRAINE: Türk Deplores Horrific Human Cost as Russia's Full-scale Invasion Enters Third Year, 2024) In its latest report, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has verified 30,457 civilian casualties since 24 February 2022, including 10,582 killed and 19,875 injured, with the actual numbers likely to be significantly higher. Millions have been displaced, thousands have lost their homes, and hundreds of medical, financial and educational institutions have been damaged or destroyed, significantly impacting people's rights to health, finance, and education. (Ukraine: Report Reveals War's Long-term Impact Which Will Be Felt 'For Generations,' 2024) In addition, the war has brought about some serious allegations against Russia including extreme torture and summary execution. Hundreds and thousands of people are left with a dire future, with nothing definite anymore and with no end in sight to this horrific situation.

5.3 Psychology:

As the war between Russia and Ukraine escalates further, people are experiencing immense psychological trauma in addition to physical injuries, displacement, loss of loved ones, and the destruction of their homes and communities, leading to long-lasting emotional scars and a sense of hopelessness for many, especially children. The psychological toll of living in constant fear, hiding in metro stations, and bomb shelters among many other similar places, witnessing violence, and facing uncertainty has exacerbated the already dire humanitarian crisis, creating a generation at risk of severe mental health challenges. However, luckily the Ukrainians are showing lesser symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression, it's not as critically high as is the status quo in war-ridden areas. One such limitation of this analysis is that it hasn't considered any of the people living or having been in direct contact with the armed forces of the Russian Federation. (Kurapov et al., 2023)

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