

## *Original Paper*

# Russia's Motivations for Invading Ukraine: Through Waltz's Three Images Analysis

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### ***Abstract***

*After the Russo-Ukrainian War broke out, the motivations that caused Russia to launch the war are disputable and have no certain answers. In order to figure out the mystery, the article used Kenneth Waltz's three images theory to analyze Russia's motivations comprehensively. In the international image, NATO's expansion enhanced Russia's vulnerability, which provoked Russia's aggressive reaction to Ukraine. On the other hand, the strengthening relations with China and Russia's motivated bias embolden Russia to launch the war. In the domestic image, Russia's stringent economic environment and embedded chauvinism stimulated Russia to solve the internal issue through war and restore its past glory. On the individual level, because of Putin's ambition, he was attempting to use the war to sustain his popularity and wrote down his name in history.*

### ***Keywords***

*The Russo-Ukrainian War, Three-Image Theory, International Security*

## **1. Introduction**

After Russia took over Crimea in 2014, there was no major conflict that broke out in the past eight years. Even though the regional conflicts had never been stoppable and tension between great powers were always maintained, the general peace of the global order was still preserved. However, following Russia's launch of a total war against Ukraine, the general peace was broken. Until now, scholars still don't have a certain answer to explain why Russia decided to initiate this war. Thus, this essay would mainly analyze the motivations that caused Russia to initiate the Russo-Ukrainian war. The essay would consist of two parts. The first part would introduce the background of the Russo-Ukraine war briefly, and the second part would analyze the reasons that caused Russia to attack Ukraine in three dimensions (images): the dimension of inter-state level, the dimension of domestic level, and the dimension of individual level.

## 2. The Background of the Russo-Ukraine War

The beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War could trace back to October 2021, when Russia started to deploy its troops and military equipment along the Ukrainian Border, which provoked concern about the risk of potential attacks from Russia (CFR, 2022). Then, from November to December, commercial satellite imagery gradually displayed that Russia started to move armor, missiles, and other heavy weapons to approach the Ukrainian border. In addition, by the name of a joint military exercise with Belarus, Russia increased its troops up to 100,000, and the size of its military exercise was ten times larger than in the past (Kgblee, 2022). After Russia's series of actions, the intelligence officials of the U.S. government warned that Russia might launch an attack against Ukraine in early 2022. Following the mid-December of 2021, Russia's foreign ministry demanded several requirements from the United States, which included the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as well as the United States' termination of all military activity in Central and Eastern Europe, promise that Ukraine would never join the NATO, and stopping the further expansion of NATO since it threatens Russia's national security. Nevertheless, all those demands were rejected by the United States and most NATO allies. Instead, they warned Russia that if Ukraine was invaded, they would impose severe economic sanctions on Russia (CFR, 2022).

In order to assure Ukraine's national security, the United States sent defensive weapons to the Ukrainian government. President Biden also ordered three thousand troops to Poland and Romania to counter Russia's possible attacks. During the crisis, negotiations were processed among the United States, Russia, and other European powers, but no satisfactory agreement was reached. In late February of 2022, the United States warned Ukraine again that Russia was increasing its troops along the Ukrainian border and intended to attack Ukraine. Soon after that, Russian troops were moved to Luhansk and Donetsk of Eastern Ukraine under the claims of peacekeeping, which forced the United States to impose severe sanctions on these two regions and the Stream 2 gas pipeline. On February 24, Putin formally announced a full-scale war against Ukraine after a Security Council meeting of the United Nations (CFR, 2022). According to the newest data, there were more than 2,500 Ukrainians and 6,000 Russian soldiers killed in this war (Thomas, 2022).

## 3. Russia's Motivations for Invading Ukraine

According to Kenneth Waltz's opinion, it is indispensable to analyze the causes of war through three images: the international (inter-state) image, the domestic image, and the individual image. All of these images are interrelated to each other, and without or only focusing on one or two of these images would make the analysis biased and partisan (Waltz, 2018). Therefore, in order to find out the motivations for Russia's invasion of Ukraine comprehensively, this essay would use the three-image theoretical framework to analyze the war. In the international image, there are three reasons that caused Russia to attack Ukraine: the expansion of NATO, the further strengthening of Sino-Russia relations, and Russia's motivated bias towards the western powers. On the domestic level, the major reasons are Russia's weakened economic condition and Russia's embedded chauvinism. Finally, on the individual's level, the

staple motivation was caused by Putin's personal ambition.

### *3.1 NATO's Expansion*

The first major reason that caused Russia to initiate the attack on Ukraine is NATO's Expansion, and this idea is supported by realists like Henry Kissinger and Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer, 2014). During history, NATO has expanded six times, and three of the enlargements were processed after the Cold War. The first expansion after the Cold War happened in 1997 when Poland, Hungary, and Czech were approved to join NATO. After this enlargement, NATO's total forces were increased by 15 percent, and its front line advanced 460 miles towards the Russian border. Due to this enlargement, the tactical aviation of NATO could attack Russia's important cities like St. Petersburg, Murmansk, Kursk, and Voronezh from Poland easily, which started to provoke Russia's perception of vulnerability (2014). In addition, from 2002 to 2004, all Baltic States were incorporated into NATO, which caused NATO forces to approach the border of Russia further. In response to this action, Russia's former Defense Minister, Ivanov, warned that if NATO kept expanding its front lines, Russia would reconsider its nuclear policy, and strengthen its combat readiness of the Baltic fleet (2014). Finally, in 2008, Bush's statement of endorsing the aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO crossed Russia's red line. Russia's deputy foreign minister, Grushko, warned the United States that approving Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO would be a huge strategic mistake, and Putin directly pointed out that admitting those two countries would be a direct threat to Russia. Thus, in order to avoid and deter Georgia from joining NATO, Putin had decided to reincorporate Abkhazia and South Ossetia by launching military action. In 2014, in order to prevent Ukraine from joining the European Union and further being admitted by NATO, Putin also processed a military operation to annex Crimean (Mearsheimer, 2014).

In the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022, Russia's offense is still reacting to the latent enlargement of NATO. In 2019, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine succeeded in enshrining Ukraine's membership in NATO and the European Union as a strategic goal in its constitution, which largely agitated the Russian government (Global Times, 2019). After Zelenskyy became the Ukrainian President, even if he attempted to improve Ukraine's bilateral relations with Russia in the beginning, Zelenskyy still sought to join NATO and the European Union actively (Troianovski, 2019). In 2021, Zelenskyy even talked to President Biden about urging NATO to accelerate the process of incorporating Ukraine (Shylenko, 2021). Combining the historical conflict with NATO and the active intention of Zelenskyy, it is predictable that Russia's military action is an attempt to repeat its efforts in 2008 and 2014 for dissuading Ukraine from joining NATO. Just as Mearsheimer concluded in an interview, the western power was trying to poke a bear in the eye with a stick, and it is impossible for a bear to walk away without any reaction (Mearsheimer, 2022).

Why was Russia so concerned about the expansion of NATO? There are two explanations that could address this problem. The first reason is the security dilemma between Russia and NATO. Because the global system is anarchist, and countries' defense strategies were usually opaque to each other, states could not understand each other's intentions clearly. Therefore, each state must enhance its military

capability to protect its safety, which could explain why states near Russia always sought to join NATO (Mearsheimer, 2001). On the other hand, because Russia doesn't understand NATO's intention as western powers understand themselves, even the defensive actions of NATO states would usually be considered as an offensive signal by the Russian government, which would trap both sides into the spiral model (Jervis, 1976). Therefore, because of the misperception, Russia has to start an arms race and even a preventive war to strengthen its safety. The second reason could be explained by Russia's sense of insecurity throughout history. Because most of Russia's important cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg were in the west, and there were minimum natural barriers to help Russia against the western invasion, Russia always tried to extend its border to the west as buffer zones (Kissinger, 1994). Especially after WWII, because of the concern of being invaded by Germans again, the Soviet Union merged half of Poland as its buffer zone (Herring, 2017). Therefore, NATO's expansion was whittling Russia's buffer zones step by step, which would have provoked Russia's sense of vulnerability that was brought about by historical context.

### *3.2 The Further Strengthening of Sino-Russian Relation*

The further strengthening of Sino-Russian relations is the second reason in the international image to motivate Russia to launch an attack against Ukraine.

According to the theory of windows of opportunity, states have an incentive to attack their neighbors whenever they anticipate an adverse shift in the balance of power (Jervis, 1991). Following the strengthened ties between China and Russia as well as the rapid rising of Chinese power, Russia could be motivated to adopt an emboldened policy against Ukraine and western powers.

After the Cold War was over, because both Russia and China faced mutual pressures from the United States, the tie between China and Russia strengthened rapidly. Especially in 2019, China decided to further the bilateral relation between China and Russia to a comprehensive strategic partnership (Fa, 2019). In addition, China is Russia's largest trading partner from 2009 to 2021 (FMPRC, 2020), and Russia is China's largest crude oil importer, electricity importer, and arms trade importer (Xue, 2021). Furthermore, after western powers sanctioned Russia severely in 2014, China also acted as the main actor to stop Russia's economy from total collapse. Immediately after western powers sanctioned Russia, the Chinese government signed a 400 billion dollar agreement with Russia about building a natural gas pipeline. In the same year, China increased 36 percent of Russia's oil imports, which largely alleviated Russia's economic pressures from sanctions (Overland & Kubayeva, 2017). China still needs a relatively stronger Russia to ease Chinese tension with the United States, because most Chinese scholars believe that once Russia collapses, the United States would concentrate its powers to contain China (Ying, 2022). The Russian government is likely to understand Chinese intentions well, so they launched a bold military action to attack Ukraine. At the beginning of the Russo-Ukraine War, China already increased its agricultural imports from Russia and encouraged Chinese customers to buy Russian products (BBC, 2022). Therefore, it could be foreseen that Russia might preserve its intense military actions in Ukraine even if it faced tough resistance and international pressures from the west.

### *3.3 Russia's Motivated Bias towards Western Powers*

Statesmen always have motivated bias and unmotivated bias toward different countries. When motivated bias plays a dominant role, the bias towards its counterpart and itself would make the country rationalize its choice of policy, which often causes the statesman to underestimate or overestimate the counterpart and the country's own capacity (Jervis, 1991). A very prominent example is the Nazi's military operation towards the Soviet Union during WWII. Because Hitler successfully conquered Poland and France by blitzkrieg, and Soviet military performance was terrible in Finland from 1939 to 1940, which made Hitler exaggerate the Nazi's strength and underestimate the Soviet's military potential. Finally, Hitler decided to invade the Soviet Union in 1941, which became one of the biggest factors that caused Nazi Germany to fail WWII since Hitler processed an inappropriate plan to attack the Soviet Union based on the wrong estimation of both sides (Glantz & House, 2015).

It is possible that the weaker performance of the United States in both domestic and international issues as well as Russia's successful military performance in recent decades made Putin fall into a similarly motivated bias. In domestic affairs, two of the main events often made people underestimate the strength of the United States. The first event is its inefficient performance to tackle Covid-19. America's reputation was weakened by its sluggish recovery from the great pandemic. The United States has 79.6 million people tested positive for Covid-19, and 969,000 people were killed by the virus. Both statistics are the highest in the world until today (Worldometer, 2021). The other event is the 2021 Storming of the United States Capitol. In this event, Trump's supporters conquered Capitol Hill since they believed the result of the presidential election was rigged by the Democrats (Zurcher, 2022). Due to this event, many politicians in the world started to doubt the U.S. basic political capacity for peaceful power transition. In addition, several Russian lawmakers even criticized that "the U.S. is no longer in a position to dictate the direction and terms of global politics" (Doubaia, 2021), which proved that the Russian politicians were already convinced that America's power was much weaker in 2021. On the other hand, on the global stage, Biden withdrew all the U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and the Taliban took over the whole country rapidly after, weakening America's image further (Nast, 2021). In response to this affair, Putin and several other Russian officials propagated the failure of the state-building of the United States in the world and condemned Biden's decision as irresponsible (Chesnut & Waller). Thus, through these weak performances of the United States in recent years, Russia might underestimate western powers' capacities, which could encourage him to predict that Russia's offense to Ukraine would not face any harsh resistance.

On the Russian side, its military operations have generally been successful in recent decades. In the Second Chechen War, Russia severely destroyed the force of separatism in this region and started to maintain the general peace in 2009 (BBC, 2009). In 2008, the Russian military successfully defeated Georgia and kept the independence of South Ossetia as well as Abkhazia (Maksimov, 2021). In addition, in either the Crimea Crisis or the military intervention in Syria, Russia reached its strategic goal by merging Crimea and preserving the regime of Assad (Roebuck, 2022). Therefore, based on its previous

successful military operation, Russia would exaggerate its military capacity during the Russo-Ukraine War. Combining the underestimation of the U.S. powers by its weak performance in the Covid issue, storming of the Capital, withdrawal from Afghanistan, and a series of successes of Russia's past military actions would boost Putin to overestimate Russia's capacity to achieve success and underestimate western's ability to react to its invasion.

### *3.4 Russia's Weakened Economic Condition*

In the second image, the level of domestic politics, the first reason that motivated Russia to offend Ukraine is due to its weaker domestic economic condition. In history, when an empire was bearing a severe economic depression or recession, it usually would choose to initiate an external war to resolve the domestic economic issue. Hitler's foreign policy is a very conspicuous example. The major contribution that helped Hitler to hold the power was the shock brought by the Great Recession to the German economy. In order to improve the economy, Hitler initiated a series of external wars, which finally made the whole world suffer (Doerr, Peydró & Voth, 2019).

Before the war, Russia was facing a stringent economic environment. After Russia was sanctioned by the western powers in 2014, Russia's GDP only has grown by an average of 0.3 percent annually. In comparison, the global average was 2.3 percent per year. In addition, Russia's foreign credits and foreign direct investment have slashed by approximately 3 percent annually (Aslund & Snegovaya, 2021). Besides this, because of the global pandemic, Russia's unemployment rate was raised to 6.3 percent, and half a million jobs have been lost in the manufacturing, construction, retail, and hospitality services sectors (World Bank, 2020). Even though China is trying to improve Russia's economic development by extending the cooperation between the two countries since 2014, it is still not sufficient to reverse the downtrend of Russia's weakened economy. As a result, with the purpose of improving domestic economic issues and transferring the domestic conflicts by external wars, the Russian government launched the war on Ukraine.

### *3.5 Russia's Embedded Chauvinism*

Russia's embedded Chauvinism is another motivation that drives Russia to initiate the war. In Russia, most people always support the government to restore the glory of its pre-Soviet days. According to a Rutgers University's Professor, Alexander Motyl's opinion, neo-imperial ambitions are embedded in Russia's culture, and the Russian government is always trying to expand its sphere of influence to pre-Soviet territories (Zeng, 2016). Ukraine is an extremely crucial and meaningful part of Russia's historical context. For example, Russians always perceive Kievan Rus as the origin of its culture, and this region is in Ukraine today. Also, Russia's Black Sea fleet was established in Ukraine for hundreds of years and fought several great wars against the United Kingdom and France over this region in the 19th century (Popovici, 2018). In addition, in the Soviet period, Ukraine was the most significant industrial base for the Soviet Union. Most of the Soviet's aircraft, space, metallurgy industry, and its largest dockyard were built in Ukraine (Wang, 2022). Therefore, one of the major factors that stimulated the Russian military to launch this attack could be explained by their willingness to restore the glory of the

Russian Empire. After Putin declared war, even under the severe western sanction, Putin's support rate in Russia surged from 60 percent to 71 percent (Zhang, 2022).

### *3.6 Putin's Personal Ambition*

Finally, Putin's personal ambition is also one of the explanations for the broken-out of the Russo-Ukrainian War. According to the scholar, Pastukhov's view, Putin always needs to shore up his domestic support by fighting a war. And as a power junkie, Putin became the hostage to his own brinkmanship (Bort, 2022). Indeed, through the wars, Putin successfully strengthened its support rates in the past. In 2000, because Putin initiated the Second Chechen War, with the exceptional performance of Russia's military, Putin's support rate was raised from 31 percent in 1999 to 84 percent in 2000 (An, 2019). Besides this, during the Crimean Crisis in 2014, Putin's support rate was raised from 65 percent to 89 percent (Nie, 2014). In this war, Putin's support rate surged as well. His support rate was 11 percent higher before the war (Zhang, 2022). Therefore, it could be concluded that Putin could always successfully strengthen its power through wars.

In addition, Putin is a man with the ambition to leave his name in the history books, so he always acts like a strongman as his most appreciated historical figure, Catherine the Great (Krapfl, 2022). Also, Putin had made the promise in 2000 that he would make Russia great again within 20 years (Stent, 2020). Therefore, Putin always pursues expanding Russia's territories and restoring Russia's glory. Then, once Putin achieved victory in the Russo-Ukrainian war, he would successfully become the national hero of Russia as he wished, and his ambition would come true.

## **4. Conclusion**

In summary, this essay analyzes the articles through three images: international image, domestic image, and individual image. In the image of the international system, there are three factors that might drive Russia to be involved in the Russo-Ukrainian War. The first factor is caused by NATO's expansion, which harshly retrenched Russia's security buffer zone and provoked Russia's sense of insecurity. The second factor is the encouragement from a blooming China's economy and the strengthening of ties between both states. The closer ties between China and Russia and China's intention to back Russia continuously due to its strategic needs encouraged Russia to initiate this war without any concerns. Finally, Russia's motivated bias towards the western powers caused Russia to underestimate its counterparts' capacities due to the recent weak performance of the United States, and Russia overestimated itself by its several successful military operations from the 20th century. As a result, Russia launched the war because it considered that it would easily achieve success like the past operations. In the image of domestic politics, there are two major factors that could interpret Russia's offense. Russia's weakening economic condition causes the first one since it was sanctioned in 2014, then the Russian government was eager to transfer the domestic pressures caused by external wars. Besides this, Russia's embedded Chauvinism provides another explanation. Because Ukraine is extremely crucial for Russia in a historical context, most Russian people are seeking to merge Ukraine to restore its past glory. Finally, Putin's personal ambition

could be the explanation for the individual image. Putin often uses wars to raise his support rate to strengthen his power, and he is eager to act like a strongman by restoring the Russian empire's glory, which could make his ambitious dream, of leaving himself in the history textbook, come true. Therefore, merging Ukraine would be a helpful way to help him to reach his dream. With the framework of three images, Russia's uncertain motivations for offending Ukraine could be comprehensively analyzed, and it would also be a good way for the scholars of international relations to approach the issue better.

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