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**1. Introduction**

The European states, Japan, South Korea and the United States, academically denominated as ‘the West’, have represented a steady political, economic and legislative supremacy in the international system since the end of the Cold War and they have assumed the role of global leaders and trend setters. Perhaps rightfully so, seeing how they have established the most successful cooperative block of nations yet and have progressed ever east-ward with their integration process, have averted or dealt with most conflicts which have arisen in recent times, they have solidified international governance and economic organizations which they largely control themselves and they have greatly progressed in terms of energy and resource security and efficiency as well as environmental sustainability. Once in a while, however, the foundations of our Western-centric belief system are rocked by an ideological earthquake in the form of one of the other major (or rising) powers acting in spite of Western authority. The West can occasionally handle these international acts of defiance quite well, as in the case of China’s expansion of its air defense identification zone. At other times however, such as with the recent Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea, its response is practically non-existent. Are we potentially facing the limits of Western interventionism?

This is one of the major premises which this paper will attempt to question with the final aim of analyzing long-term American strategies employed to counter-balance the rise of Russia, leading up to the latter’s invasion of part of Ukraine. In reaching a comprehensive understanding of this issue, the paper will first outline a theoretical framework which adequately describes the international system from a relevant perspective, namely political realism. Subsequently, it will attempt to answer two questions which are essential to deciphering the problem formulation: a) what is meant by ‘the rise’ of Russia? and b) Why does the US need to react in the first place? The paper will then proceed to analyze key (relatively) recent historical events which have shaped relations between the world hegemon and its Cold War nemesis in an attempt to uncover ongoing diplomatic trends. The main focus will then be the Ukrainian crisis and the events which preceded it, which will be analyzed in the context of US-Russian long-term relations and the region’s historical background. By the end, we should have gathered sufficient knowledge in order to determine whether the Ukrainian Crisis was an unpredictable oddity of International Relations, an event precipitated solely by a newfound Russian sense of imperialism or, more likely, whether (and how) it fits into the grand scheme of US-Russian power-politics. The conclusion of the paper will also attempt to make some predictions regarding the potential future developments of the Ukrainian conflict based on the established analysis.

**Problem Formulation:** A realist analysis of the Ukrainian Crisis based on the interests of secondary actors: Russia and the United States, aimed at uncovering whether the conflict was an unpredictable, game-changing event or merely the natural consequence of US-Russian relations.

**2. Methodology**

**2.1 Selected Subject**

The topic of this paper was selected due to a number of factors.

First and foremost, its contemporary setting grants it special significance and relevance to international relations today. The Ukrainian conflict is arguably the greatest challenge to Western, as well as Russian, security since the Cold War and analyzing it in the context of long-term US-Russian relations should prove of vital importance in uncovering the source and causes of the crisis.

Secondly, this topic was of particular interest because of its depiction in the Western media and academia as a Russian-led imperialist incursion into Europe. This perspective bluntly ignores the role played by the Western powers in destabilizing and dividing the Ukrainian political structure with the purpose of removing the country from under Russia’s sphere of influence.

Lastly, the topic was also convenient due to the author’s intimate knowledge of Eastern European policies and political circumstances, given the fact that he was born and raised in Romania, one of Ukraine’s neighboring countries and its former ally (as part of the Eastern Bloc until 1989).

**2.2 Timeline**

The timelines selected for this paper are somewhat confusing, because it is structured into chapters based on a logical, rather than a chronological, line of reasoning. This being said, the most relevant timeline employed spans from 1990, with the reunification of Germany, and ends with the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in early 2014. However, the paper will occasionally delve deeper into the historical context of certain circumstances or events when such an analysis is required, such as with the case of the inception of NATO, the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine etc. Additionally, the latter part of the paper will also briefly touch on some events which transpired during the Ukrainian conflict, mainly with the purpose of analyzing US’ reaction to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the effectiveness thereof.

**2.3 Research Design**

This paper is largely a descriptive analysis of the spiral of US-Russian relations and its culmination with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The research is initially confirmatory by nature, testing the hypotheses that Russia is rising and that the US is forced to react thereto. The research then conducted in the main body, leading up to the conclusion, will be of exploratory nature, taking multiple historical events and different perspectives into account while attempting to uncover whether the causes of the Ukrainian crisis are rooted mainly internally or externally.

**2.4 Empirical Data and Collection Method**

The vast majority of data employed in this study is qualitative, second-hand material. A qualitative analysis was simply more adequate for this paper because it focuses on meta-relations in the international system, which requires a broad and more systemic approach. However, the paper does occasionally include pieces of quantitative material, such as statistics regarding the approval ratings of NATO in Ukraine etc.

No field study was undertaken by the author due to the fact that the conflict is still ongoing with open fighting and serious casualties in the East, as well as some international observers being kidnapped.

**2.5 Sources**

As mentioned, the vast majority of data employed in this study is qualitative, second-hand information, obtained from academic journals, news sources and media outlets. The author has struggled to include sources from different (relevant) cultures and perspectives in order to carry out an unbiased analysis (or rather, one that takes all biases into account).

Amongst the vast amount of sources employed in this paper, the most noteworthy is probably Robert Gilpin’s ‘Theory of Hegemonic War’, based on Thucydides’ consideration of hegemonic struggle and the causes and implications thereof. This theoretical masterpiece proved to be paramount in deciphering the interactions and dynamics between the US and Russia, arguably the prime contender to the status of world hegemon.

**2.6 Reliability**

The reliability of the data employed in this paper is arguable at best, and this is why the author has attempted to diversify the source material in order to attempt to achieve objectivity by comparing alternative, subjective views, based on the interests of the source as well. The reason for the unreliability is the fact that both Russia and the West own powerful propaganda machines which create diverging views and can drastically alter peoples’ perceptions on the conflict. The more recent the events, the murkier their objectivity is. While it was possible to objectively describe relational tends such as the expansion of NATO or the background of the Ukraine, it proved to be impossible to approach the ongoing conflict in Ukraine in the same manner, because accounts of it in different media are extremely diverse.

This is why the author has attempted to use the news sources and media outlets merely as starting points for an informed argument and analysis, rather than the foundation thereof. For example, part of the main body of the paper is based on Vladimir Putin’s speech to the Russian Parliament, but the author doesn’t simply take the stated affirmations for granted. Rather, he performs an in-depth analysis based on documented and verified sources, corroborated by his own experiences, knowledge and theoretical and academic background.

**2.7 Limitations**

This study and the research strategy behind it presented itself with two main limitations.

Firstly, the fact that the Ukrainian conflict has been escalating in the past few months has meant that it is impossible to uncover an objective narrative or timeline to it, though this is perhaps not entirely relevant because the paper focuses on the international causes leading up to the crisis rather than the crisis itself. This still complicates the task of the author though, because he has to be extra careful not to make any assumptions regarding the conflict or its outcomes based on his research, despite the fact that this study should be most appropriate for making predictions about how the situation is likely to develop. This is because the world does not necessarily function based on deterministic principles. Even if it did, it is almost impossible to take into account all the factors and details which have governed East-West relations leading up to the Ukrainian conflict, from all relevant perspectives and theoretical frameworks, and certainly impossible to sum them up within the limited boundaries of an academic paper. However, this does not mean that this paper is entirely ill-suited for providing predictions of how the crisis will evolve, but merely that a meta-analysis can only lead to meta-predictions, while being unable to address the smaller details of how the situation will unfold.

The paper is therefore largely limited to analyzing the causes and sources of the Ukrainian conflict rather than the ongoing developments. However, in this case, a limitation can represent a valuable opportunity as well: Some of the recent developments can help to shed light on the preceding strategies of the primary (international) actors. For example, the fact that the US was so quick to support the legitimacy of a revolutionary government staging a coup suggests that the West is likely on friendly terms with the new government, or perhaps seeking to counter Russian influence in the region.

A second limitation is regarding the academic and media sources employed in the research. Seeing how the author doesn’t speak either Russian or Ukrainian, most sources have been of Western provenance, or were translated from Russian/Ukrainian into English. This, of course, diminishes their reliability to some extent, as partial or biased translations can heavily influence the information. A very straight-forward example is that of Ahmadinejad’s infamous and controversial quote regarding ‘wiping Israel off the face of the Earth’ while his speech was, in fact, proposing a democratic solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict and reiterating a strong defensive posture against a potential Israeli invasion.

**3. Theory**

The realist tradition will provide this paper with the necessary theoretical framework for analyzing US-Russian relations and their evolution. The realist school best describes the security-centric self-interested and self-helping nature of international relations which determines the actions and strategies of states. It is in the US’ self-interest to preserve, expand and project its political power, it is in Russia’s self-interest to maintain safe and reliable borders and the Ukrainian crisis is ultimately the consequence of the clash between the interests of these major powers.

Power is the immediate goal of the state and the ways and approaches to demonstrate power, gaining power or using power are defined as political actions. International politics is described as power politics, international relations are inherently conflictual and international conflicts can only be resolved through power politics, even war. [[1]](#footnote-2) The main and only significant actors in international relations are states and their interactions define the contemporary political context. The main priorities of these actors are national security and the pursuit and projection of national interest. The realist school views the international system as anarchic, lacking order and global governance, and international treaties and agreements as meaningless due to the lack of an enforcement mechanism; they depend merely on states’ willingness to respect them. Furthermore, the dynamics of international relations are determined by unequal growth and distribution of power between the states.[[2]](#footnote-3) This implies an international hierarchy of states whereby the richer and more powerful nations have more leverage and political pressure on the rest of the system. As the Ancient Greek historian Thucydides once stated, ‘the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept’[[3]](#footnote-4). The same political philosopher predicted the process of polarization which was prominent during the Cold War (and ongoing today).

‘Polarization is the process that causes neutral parties to take sides in a conflict. It also causes individuals on either side of the conflict to take increasingly extreme positions that are more and more opposed to each other. As parties move toward these opposite "poles," they define themselves in terms of their opposition to a common enemy. Trust and respect diminish, and "distorted perceptions and simplified stereotypes emerge." Parties assume more rigid positions and may refuse to negotiate.[[4]](#footnote-5)

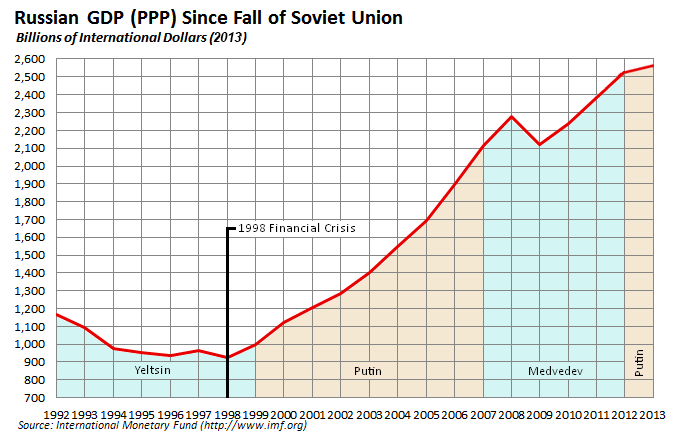
As one can imagine, cooperation in a realist world is all but an illusion. Relations are instead governed by suspicion, which easily escalates into mistrust, which then translates into insecurity, ultimately hindering states from achieving their interests, sometimes even when their interests are not mutually exclusive. Also, the principle of polarization poses a further problem to cooperation, namely that some states are dependent on others for trade or security and are therefore somewhat limited in their foreign policies.

Lastly, the ‘security dilemma’ posed by the realist school is of special significance to our topic. This theory is based on the fact that defensive military forces and weapons can easily be employed as offensive capabilities, particularly when faced with geographical proximity (as is relevant in the case of Russia and Europe). The logical conclusion is that each nation must arm itself in the eventuality of a conflict, which might include the forces of several enemies combined. This creates a spiral of military proliferation through which, paradoxically, individual nations actually *lose* security as they build up their defenses.

To complement the realist framework, several aspects of risk perception and risk management theory will be briefly employed as constructivist tools of analyzing how different perceptions of US-Russian relations shape their foreign policy.

**4. The rise of Russia**

The ‘rise’ of Russia is the first notion which needs to be clarified in order to genuinely comprehend the thesis question. The rise of Russia is generally discussed in the context of the ascension to power of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations as an economic block. Individually, however, Russia is a rather particular and peculiar case amongst the BRICS countries. So how exactly is Russia ‘rising’?  
 **Economically**? To some extent. As the following graphic shows, Russia has been experiencing significant economic growth since 1998.

 *Fig. 1*[[5]](#footnote-6)

The economic growth is there, however, Russia obtains most of its income from manufacturing and exporting its natural resources and while it does not have a shortage thereof, overly export-oriented economies are not exactly perfect models for sustainable long-term development and growth. Besides, Russia’s economic growth is measly compared to China or India, albeit decent compared to Brazil or other east-European countries. In conclusion, Russia *has* been experiencing economic growth, particularly so relative to the United States which is undergoing a severe economic crisis.

Has Russia been rising from a **military** point of view? Again, yes, to some degree. The think tank ‘Global Firepower’ (GFP) ranks the United States as the top military force in the world, with Russia being the prime contender[[6]](#footnote-7). Recent developments also reveal that Russia has been spending an increasing proportion of its budget on improving and reforming military capabilities.[[7]](#footnote-8) However, this again is not a major issue to the US, seeing how, first of all, Russian technology is significantly lagging behind theirs and secondly, because a conventional military conflict between two countries which possess over 4000 readily usable nuclear warheads combined is highly unlikely. If a serious, head-on military confrontation occurred between the US and Russia, it would most likely end in either a stand-off or a nuclear holocaust, regardless of which of the nations had superior conventional military capabilities.

Is Russia expanding **territorially**? Once again, yes, to a very limited extent, but as is the case with conventional military capabilities, it is probably irrelevant for the most part. Russia has expanded its borders (relative to its borders since early USSR times) in the South and West on several occasions, through the recognition of the ‘independence’ (somewhat ironic since ‘independence’ in this context means dependence on Moscow) of several states which fractioned, such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia and, more recently and much more significantly, Crimea. However, given the nature of modern military and infrastructural capabilities, the sheer amount of territory governed by a country is not as relevant to international relations as it used to be. The more politically relevant aspect of this transition is represented by the recent developments in Ukraine; Russia expanding its territory within its pre-existing spheres of influence is understandable and manageable, but Russian expansion into Europe is a major threat for the West and bitterly reminiscent of the aftermath of the second World War which essentially divided the continent. On the other hand, as will be detailed in further chapters, it is arguable that Russia has a primary interest (and perhaps right) to maintain positive relations with its neighbors, as well as prevent them from adhering to potential enemies (be it EU or NATO).

The most transparent way in which Russia is on the rise, however, is in its **position as a key international player**. This is, in part, due to the systemic change in power which has been occurring on a global level. As China and India experience economic growth, they are expanding their internal markets, which create and enhance trade opportunities with a major resource exporter such as Russia. One of the main consequences thereof is a reduced economic interdependence between the Russian Federation and the West, which enables Mr. Putin to pursue independent international policies with diminished fear of repercussions. The effect of this circumstance has been visible in the initial round of sanctions imposed by the US and EU after the Russian invasion of Crimea, whereby the abroad-based assets of certain Russian and Crimean statesmen were frozen.[[8]](#footnote-9) Firstly, these are extremely inefficient sanctions to begin with; targeting individuals and businesses rather than the government or Mr. Putin himself is a) utterly devoid of a serious impact on the Russian economy as a whole and b) lacking a symbolic gesture of commitment to punishing Russia (not to mention restore Crimea to Ukraine). Furthermore, the sanctions are little short of a prank (as Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, one of the prominent individuals targeted by the sanctions, posted on twitter[[9]](#footnote-10)) when analyzed in the contemporary international context, whereby a law which bans government officials from owning off-shore assets was passed in Russia 9 months before the sanctions were imposed. [[10]](#footnote-11) In light of this fact, the claims of Igor Sechin, head of Rosneft (Russia’s largest oil company), that the sanctions are ‘evidence of powerlessness’[[11]](#footnote-12) might be more accurate than we are led to believe by his defiant straightforwardness.

**5. Why does the US need to react to the rise of Russia?**

After discussing and determining how Russia is on the rise, the overarching thesis question needs to address the issue of why the United States is forced to react at all. One might argue that the recent annexation of Crimea does not concern America in the slightest, being a conflict between another major power and a neutral state which has spent the past 20 years in ambivalence over its polarization tendencies. Perhaps Russia’s economic growth could be seen as positive by a liberal-minded academic in the sense that this would bolster economic cooperation with the West. Perhaps Russia’s emergence as a significant global actor could even complement US foreign policy, in light of its consistent failures in military interventionism, peace keeping and nation building. The subsequent sub-chapters will outline the various reasons why the rise of Russia poses an issue to the United States and, implicitly, why the latter is forced to react thereto.

**5.1: Loss of Relative Power**

Power is the ultimate, ceaseless stride of states according to the realist school of thought. However, power in IR is defined by a nation’s ability to deter potential enemies and is thus relative by nature. Therefore, an economic, military and influential growth of Russia certainly poses an issue to its Western counterpart. The problem for the United States in this matter is threefold. Firstly, there is the growth experienced by Russia itself, whose geo-political strategies the US will inadvertently conflict with, on occasion. Secondly, this growth coincides with a long-standing economic recession in the West, whose economic foundation has been ravaged by the housing and banking crises, as well as the Eurozone debt crisis, thus further diminishing the position of the US. Furthermore, while the Russian Federation is gradually expanding its military program as detailed in the previous chapter, the United States is in the process of implementing the Budget Control Act of 2011, whereby the government is obliged to reduce its defense and non-defense budget by an average of $109.3bn in order to attempt a $1.2 trillion budget deficit reduction by 2021.[[12]](#footnote-13) As America reduces its military presence throughout the world, realism predicts that any of the rising nations would be more than happy to fill the power vacuum which will ensue, and Russia could be a prime contender. This brings us to the third issue which the United States is facing in this scenario: Not only is Russia experiencing growth while the West is suffering from economic recession and unsuccessful military operations, amongst other things, but other great nations are growing and developing as well. What does this have to do with US-Russian relations? As it turns out, quite a lot. Since power in the international system is relative, great power interactions (and the balance of power mechanics) in a bipolar system are fairly straight-forward. However, as new power hubs emerge, this poses additional issues to:

**a) Security** – the existence of multiple great powers in the international system is likely to lead to ‘bandwagoning’, a process predicted by the realist school which implies nations’ alignment with a source of danger in order to deal with a greater threat[[13]](#footnote-14).

**b) Economy** - The workings of bandwagoning are already transparent actually, albeit not in a military sense, in the case of the BRICS nations aligning in order to impose their economic preferences in various institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Furthermore, EU dependency on Russian gas and energy becomes much more of a Western issue than an international one considering that Russia has alternative potential business partners who are becoming ever wealthier and more powerful.

**c) International order** – The US advantage from having been the dominant world power has been the establishment, support and enforcement of international regulative institutions such as the United Nations and the UN Security Council. He who makes the rules also gets to circumvent them on occasion. Therefore, while UN resolutions are often imposed on some states, others, such as the US (in numerous cases, including Iraq and former Yugoslavia), Britain or Israel can oftentimes ignore them. From this perspective, Vladimir Putin’s recent comments in his address to the Duma which suggest that Western powers are hypocritical might be well on point.[[14]](#footnote-15) As new superpowers arise, this ‘order’ will be increasingly challenged in order to change the balance of power in the world.

Furthermore, the notion of loss of relative power is intrinsically connected with diminishing security. Russia was the US’ arch nemesis and polar opposite for over 40 years throughout the Cold War and the European Union does not tend to happily reminisce over the division of its mainland. Mutual distrust is therefore a given, particularly considering the historic circumstances of the Russia-EU relations and their geographic proximity. From this perspective, Ukraine is a rather special case study because it eloquently outlines the security dilemma between the two major powers: With the aim of achieving security, the Eurozone and NATO have expanded ever east-ward, eventually reaching Ukraine; Russia views Ukraine as a buffer between its physical borders and the West and therefore needs it to remain friendly and under its sphere of influence; in their attempts to gain security (from each other) these two major powers are now on the verge of military conflict.

**5.2: General interest in minimizing conflict**

The realist tradition suggests that the main purpose and struggle of states is that of achieving political and military power. Naturally, once a state has reached supremacy in these regards, its primary goal becomes preserving its power and influence. In Laymen’s terms, power in IR diminishes as it is being used. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq cost the US between $4 and $6 trillion[[15]](#footnote-16), thousands of American lives and has led to over 1.000.000 injuries[[16]](#footnote-17). Most importantly, however (at least from a realist perspective), the United States received a heavy blow to both its national and international support and approval ratings. The lesson to draw therefrom is that there are two ways to preserve hegemony: ever-increasing power (a scenario which has no sustainable basis for the long term) and not employing it. However, not employing power in situations where forceful action is required is a sign of weakness and lack of resolve. Therefore, aside from employing power in international relations, the world hegemon must also attempt to limit the amount of global scenarios where unilateral intervention is required. In other words, the United States benefits from a general state of peace in the international system because its position as a global leader is less likely to be threatened. Simultaneously however, many academics argue that the US also needs military struggles in order to push its reforms through on both its own population and foreign nations.[[17]](#footnote-18)[[18]](#footnote-19) The silver lining here for the United States is that it has been attempting to form a global coalition in order to shift some of the military and political responsibilities onto other major players, while retaining its authority and decision making power. This strategy may be relatively successful for the world hegemon, at least temporarily, and also worthwhile for smaller nations trying to retain their pre-WW2 power (such as Britain and France) due to their subsequent association with the leading power on the international stage. It is understandable, however, that other great/rising nations might be irritated by this unilateral imposition of power disguised as global/multilateral politics (this is most likely what Mr. Putin refers to when he discusses ‘Western hypocrisy’). Case in point, if Russia’s veto in the UN Security Council against US military intervention in former Yugoslavia was all but dismissed[[19]](#footnote-20), Russia is surely not going to seek a UN resolution for intervening in regions at its own periphery.

**5.3: International Law and International Agreements**

The United States has been able to incorporate the rising nations into a global coalition by integrating them into Western-based international institutions of economic, social and security natures, thus creating a network of interdependence whereby violating rules or agreements in the international system can lead to the imposing of sanctions by a coalition rather than individual states. One of the most eloquent examples is the recent exclusion of Russia from the G8 as a consequence to its annexation of Crimea. In achieving this feat, the US has managed to suppress Russian cooperation with other members of the G8, such as Italy or Germany, despite the fact that these nations have little to no interest in engaging in an economic war with Russia. It is noteworthy, however, that the impacts of these actions are limited because these states maintain alternative bilateral, as well as multilateral, channels of communication and cooperation, most notably the G20, where Russia is indispensable to other members, most significantly the other BRICS nations and Turkey. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov dismissed Russia’s exclusion from the G8 as ‘no great tragedy’. [[20]](#footnote-21)

Nevertheless, the United States maintains a significant interest in enforcing international law and the upholding of international treaties. It is undoubtedly an enviable position to be in if one can afford to make all the rules and also be the only one to break them. However, in order to be a credible enforcer and/or a reliable patron, the US must at least pretend to uphold its own treaties and condone violation of international law. This being said, has Russia violated international law in its intervention in Ukraine? This point is highly debatable given the vague nature of the Charter of the United Nations.

Article 2(4) claims that ‘All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.’[[21]](#footnote-22) However, article 51 suggests that states can use force in self-defense and the right to defend one’s nationals abroad has been repeatedly invoked in IR despite occasional international backlash against this justification (by the US in Grenada[[22]](#footnote-23), UK in Libya[[23]](#footnote-24) etc.). Realistically speaking, are these acts genuinely illegal according to international law? Probably. Can they be countered, punished or reversed by the United Nations where the perpetrators are also permanent, irremovable judges? Probably not. However, despite the fact that all members of the UN Security Council have the same privileges, the US must find a way to impose itself as a global hegemon; therefore, it is pressured into unilateral reaction to Russia’s defiance.

Aside from standard international regulations, the US must also endorse the respecting of international treaties and agreements. In doing so, it must set an example by respecting its own agreements adequately. Unfortunately, the world hegemon doesn’t have a good record of doing so in the recent past, ranging from the failure of complying with ‘The Agreed Framework’ signed with North Korea in 1994[[24]](#footnote-25) which could have prevented the North Korean nuclear crisis altogether, to the Kyoto protocol which then US vice president Al Gore helped draft but the US never ratified and onto the more recent IMF reforms which never came to pass in the US senate. It should therefore come as no surprise that the US is once again unwilling to fully commit to *The Budapest Memorandum* which provided assurances regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity to Ukraine by the US, Britain and Russia[[25]](#footnote-26). The agreement was of major significance because one of its prerequisites was Ukraine’s complete nuclear disarmament, which was completed successfully by 1996. [[26]](#footnote-27) This was the second time in history when a nation voluntarily dismantled its nuclear arsenal, preceded only by the case of South Africa, who’s nuclear (as well as delivery) capabilities were far below those of Ukraine. Two decades later, part of Ukraine’s territory was invaded by its neighbor and former patron and eventually annexed thereto. If this is the fate awaiting states which renounce their nuclear arsenal in return for security assurances from the major powers then this trend is not likely to continue. Now, the United States is clearly not going to go to war against Russia over the Budapest Memorandum. However, the agreement does force the US to react in *some* way, albeit effortlessly with the aim of appeasing the public while not actually gouging the Russians into serious retaliation.

**6. Introduction to the Ukrainian Background**

**6.1: The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic**

While the history of ethnic Ukrainians (, their relations to the Russians) and their regional establishment can be traced back longer than a millennium, its most relevant developments occurred in the early 1920’s, when it underwent a brutal communist revolt, followed by a Soviet invasion and the foundation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic[[27]](#footnote-28). Prior to this, the Ukrainian territory had been part of Russia since the late 17th century. Since its inception in the form of a Soviet Republic, Ukraine has seen its borders change multiple times, most notably in the aftermath of WW2, when Russia annexed parts of Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia to Ukraine. The final territorial addition to Ukraine was in fact the southern peninsula of Crimea, in 1954.

**6.2: Crimea and Sevastopol**

Crimea had been a part of Russia since 1783 after having been conquered from the Ottoman Empire. The reasons for the transfer of Crimea from Russian to Ukrainian territory in February 1954 are rather unclear. Officially, Russia conceded the territory to ‘commemorate the 300th anniversary of the ‘Reunification of Ukraine with Russia’ ‘[[28]](#footnote-29) Additional motives cited were the geographic proximity to the Ukraine and economic considerations.[[29]](#footnote-30) However, an analysis put forth by Mark Kramer of Harvard University suggests that, more likely, the transfer was motivated by Nikita Khrushchev attempting to gain support from the political elite of the UkrSSR (Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic), as well as redeeming for the brutalities he helped enact in a civil war which had recently plagued Ukraine’s Western regions[[30]](#footnote-31). Regardless of the reasons, the territorial transfer didn’t present itself as any major overhaul of power structures, as the decision making power was still in the hands of the central Soviet administration. At the time, few people could have envisioned the break-up of the Soviet Union; therefore, the transfer of Crimea was likely seen as an issue of administrative rather than international concern.

Sevastopol is the main city and port in the Crimean Peninsula, previously deemed a ‘City with Special Status’ and currently, as part of the Russian Federation, a Federal City. After 1991, Sevastopol, as well as Crimea, remained part of Ukraine, however, Russia and the Ukrainian government bartered a deal in 1997, extended in 2010, through which the port is leased to Russia in exchange for preferential treatment on gas prices. The city-port’s significance to Russia is paramount for three main reasons. Firstly, Sevastopol holds the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which is an invaluable military-strategic asset to Russian ability to project its naval power in the region. Despite the fact that Russia’s fleet in the Black Sea is somewhat outdated, ‘consisting of about forty aging vessels dating primarily from the 1970s’ [[31]](#footnote-32), Moscow has been able to put it to good use in enacting a blockade against Georgia in the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict, in the Libya crisis, anti-pirate operations in Somalia and dismantling Syria’s chemical weapons[[32]](#footnote-33). Besides, the port is situated in an extremely well-defended position, with the sea advancing inland through a channel forming a deep inlet, around which the harbor is built. Secondly, Sevastopol is a likely and convenient hotspot for civil naval operations regarding oil and gas foraging in the large reserves around the peninsula which have been uncovered recently, thus giving the port-city considerable significance from an economic and trade perspective. [[33]](#footnote-34) Lastly, Sevastopol is historically significant to Russia, being a city and fortress settled by the Russian Empire under Catherine the Great in 1783-84 and has been a symbol of Russian naval power over the centuries. Sevastopol is also renowned in the Russian culture for having survived a siege from British, French and Turkish troops for 11 months in the Crimean War of 1854-55, as well as having lasted under siege for 250 days against a coalition of German, Romanian and Italian troops during WW2, upon which it received the ‘Hero City’ title from Russia. Ultimately, the Crimean city-port is of utter significance for the Russian Federation from a security, military, financial and historical perspectives. What was extremely worrying for Putin was the prospect of Ukraine adhering to the EU and Sevastopol falling into NATO hands, which would have immensely compromised national security for the East.

**6.3: Post-Cold War Ukraine**

Following the example of other former Soviet States, Ukraine declared its independence on the 24th of August 1991 and proceeded to obtain recognition from the international system by the end of the year (most notably, Russian President Boris Yeltsin also recognized Ukraine’s independence in December 1991). As the European Union and NATO advanced eastward over time, the prospects of Ukraine adhering to these organizations became reality, and Ukraine became a political battleground between its Western and Eastern regions over the country’s polarization tendencies.

Recent years in the political life of Ukraine have been marked by the East-West conflict in a fairly straight-forward manner. The political turmoil flared up in 2004 with the Orange (pro-Western) revolution, though political tensions can be traced to the aftermath of the Ukrainian Independence and a hasty and disproportionate privatization. Pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko won the elections in 2004 by a significant margin and proceeded to implement measures of rapprochement with Europe and NATO. However, in light of this new-found west-bound ambition, Russia saw fit to reconsider the preferential prices for its gas and energy exports to Ukraine, negotiated and agreed upon between Russia and the previous, pro-Russian government[[34]](#footnote-35). The following years on the Ukrainian political stage featured constant power shifts between pro-West and pro-East representatives, largely represented by Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yushchenko on the one side and Viktor Yanukovych, respectively, on the other\*. The elections that followed, in 2010, revealed pro-Russian Yanukovych as the new Ukrainian President, winning by a narrow margin and staying in power until his forced ousting in early 2014.

During this time-frame, both the East and the West have interfered in Ukrainian politics to some extent. Russia did it quite bluntly, employing a ‘carrot and a stick’ energy and gas policy with Ukraine, occasionally disrupting the flow of gas to the country and enacting trade bans (on Ukrainian-made cheese for example) in order to further its political agenda of keeping Kyiv under its sphere of influence. It is noteworthy that the Ukrainian economy has been, and still is, extremely dependent on Russia from multiple points of view. ‘This affects the availability of Russian markets to Ukrainian producers, and the delivery of Russian raw materials, including natural gas, to Ukrainian companies and households. In the difficult current economic climate, Ukraine is especially vulnerable to Kremlin pressure.’ [[35]](#footnote-36)

Therefore, understandably, Russia was able to employ its major economic leverage in a fairly straight-forward manner when conducting negotiations with the Ukraine, not to mention the $3.5bn debt owed by the latter for gas imports.[[36]](#footnote-37)

The West, however, employed alternative means of maintaining and increasing influence in the region. On the one hand, it has been tempting Ukraine with various proposals regarding integration into the EU and NATO, which have been met with enthusiasm by the population in the West, but skepticism and aggression by the East.

Additionally, while the details are rather murky, it turns out that there are channels through which the United States was involved in the crisis, or at least in the circumstances which preceded it. Victoria Nuland, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, openly admitted in a public speech that ‘Since Ukraine’s independence in 1991, the United States has supported Ukrainians, as they build democratic skills and institutions, as they promote civic participation and good governance, all of which are preconditions for Ukraine to achieve its European aspirations. We’ve invested over $5bn to assist Ukraine in these and other goals.’ [[37]](#footnote-38)

**6.3.1 Victoria Nuland’s Speech**

Nuland’s statement deserves an in-depth analysis because some of her allegations are purposefully vague, some of them are grossly incompatible with the overarching theory of this paper and some are just flat out lies.

The first questionable part of her speech is the suggestion that the US has invested $5bn in Ukrainians to aid the building of ‘democratic skills and institutions’ and promoting good governance. Through this expression, Nuland would have her audience believe that the US has been providing Ukraine with off-the-books development aid. Furthermore, the US has been doing it solely for noble, democratic reasons, expanding the argument into a humanitarian direction. The realist school views even ‘fair’ inter-state cooperation as flawed, frail and unsustainable for the long-term. Development and humanitarian aid within the realist framework are deemed as ultimately subjected to national interests. It is too early to uncover exactly how the US’ heavy funding of Ukrainian ‘democratic institutions’ has contributed to the Ukrainian conflict. This type of sensitive information tends to remain largely secretive for decades. However, the realist framework suggests that the money invested by the US was employed in increasing Western influence in the country and garnering public support for Ukraine’s Western integration.

The second dubious remark made by Nuland in her speech was regarding Ukraine’s ‘European aspirations’. Leaving aside Ukraine’s geographic complexity and its East-West divide, even nation-wide polls suggest that the entire country is deeply divided on this issue. Different studies and polls reveal somewhat different results, but the general trend shows that Ukrainian public support for EU accession has been rising steadily for the past decade (which of course has nothing to do with the $5bn) and that it had barely reached 50% as the conflict started to escalate. [[38]](#footnote-39) On the other hand, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center suggests that 68% of Ukrainians favor an open border with Russia[[39]](#footnote-40). Simultaneously, the same research suggests that amongst the people who support Ukraine’s membership in the EU, 63% ‘back the free movement of goods and people between Ukraine and Russia’\*.

The final issue with Victoria Nuland’s speech is its purposeful vagueness regarding exactly how the money was spent, who were the recipients, and what the scope of the US was. Lastly, her mentioning of the fact that the US supported ‘these and **other** goals’ is yet another tell-tale indication of the obscurity of US foreign policy in Ukraine leading up to the conflict. Such intentional vagueness in diplomatic language is generally designed to act as a back-up in case the speaker or government is ever prosecuted (say, for example, if information regarding further US intervention in the Ukrainian crisis is leaked).

**7. The spiral of US-Russian relations culminating with the Ukrainian crisis**

Popular belief, perpetrated by the Western media, suggests that the Ukrainian crisis occurred suddenly as its former president Viktor Yanukovych was ousted after a long series of protests, upon which Russia decided to take advantage of the political instability and invade the Eastern region of Crimea. While the latter affirmation may be true to some degree, international conflicts rarely boil down to such simplicity. In order to analyze the causes and consequences of this conflict in-depth it is important to capitalize on several key events and trends between Russia and the West, represented by the NATO-EU strategic alliance and, according to the realist tradition, an extension of US power. It is noteworthy that US-Russian relations, as well as the geo-political situation of the region of Crimea, go back a long way and have developed in many intricate ways. There have been many events and situations which have led to the Ukrainian crisis and it can be hard to assess their individual relevance. Fortunately, however, President Vladimir Putin has vastly simplified this job through his address to the Duma, the Russian parliament, where he describes which actions and interactions have precluded the recent events in Ukraine. The following sub-chapters will be analyzing short quotes from Putin’s speech which relate to how the situation evolved (or rather devolved).

**7.1: The emancipation of Kosovo**

‘the Crimean authorities referred to the well-known Kosovo precedent – a precedent our western colleagues created with their own hands in a very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country’s central authorities.**‘**[[40]](#footnote-41)

In this quote, Vladimir Putin is referring to the Kosovo War of 1998-1999. In all fairness, the United States indeed created a precedent for supporting and militarily backing the secession of Kosovo from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [[41]](#footnote-42) Furthermore, it did so in violation of international law and in violation of the UN Security council, where Russia *itself* had vetoed military intervention (accompanied by China).[[42]](#footnote-43) Not only did NATO pursue this strategy unilaterally, without the consent of the UN, but the bombing campaign itself was extremely messy and somewhat embarrassing, resulting in many civilian casualties, including three Chinese journalists in an (arguably) accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.[[43]](#footnote-44)

The Western counter-argument to these accusations is that it had no personal interest or reason to support the secession of Kosovo and that it did so merely as a humanitarian intervention with utilitarian reasoning. Many academics, however, dispute this theory and argue that imposing economic and governance reforms were a determinant factor.[[44]](#footnote-45) Be that as it may, NATO’s brazen defiance of international standards and particularly Russia’s veto in the UNSC must have sparked great distrust between Russia and the US. Furthermore, as Putin further comments, the US-backed secession of Kosovo from Yugoslavia represents a precedent for the international system whereby ‘Declarations of independence may, and often do, violate domestic legislation. However, this does not make them violations of international law’[[45]](#footnote-46). Therefore, Russia feels that Crimea should be legally allowed to secede from the Ukraine and, if it so desires, adhere to the Russian Federation. Whether or not that is the will of the people is uncontroversial, seeing how a majority of the population consists of ethnic Russians while a vast majority, over 97%, uses Russian as their primary language.[[46]](#footnote-47)

It is also noteworthy that this ‘precedent’ is actually more than a once-in-a-lifetime intervention on the part of the United States, with similar actions undertaken in Grenada in 1983 and Iraq in 2003. Putin has a valid point when he mentions that Western powers ‘have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism’. [[47]](#footnote-48)

**7.2: The Downfall of International Institutions**

‘After the dissolutionof bipolarity on the planet, we no longer have stability. Key international institutions are not getting any stronger; on the contrary, in many cases, they are sadly degrading.’ [[48]](#footnote-49)

There are two major institutions which Vladimir Putin is most likely referring to in his address to the Duma: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and, most significantly, the United Nations.

Regarding the trade and economic organization, the main issue resides in the decision making process within. The United States managed to integrate many countries into the IMF and divided the decision making power based on the relative economies of the countries. However, many nations have undergone significant development and economic growth since the inception of these institutions, while retaining a relative lack of representation therein. These states have consistently called upon the West to reorganize and reform the IMF, however, these pleads have largely gone unheeded. There was a proposed quota and governance reform package which was approved by the IMF Board of Governors in late 2010, however, the United States essentially vetoed the proposal and has not ratified the reform package until this very day, despite the fact that this move would not affect its shareholder majority in the organization. [[49]](#footnote-50)

While the West has taken an initiative in suggesting ‘economic isolation’ as a punitive measure for Russia’s actions in Crimea, the situation behind the curtain might be quite different. The truth is that the European Union is largely dependent on Russia for natural gas and energy imports.[[50]](#footnote-51) Another truth is that China has no objections against purchasing Russian gas to fuel its industrialization process at a cheap cost. This leaves very little to the imagination about which side of this potential economic conflict would have more to lose. Furthermore, in light of US reluctance of ratifying the IMF reforms, there have been discussions on moving forward with the reforms without the United States, allegedly incited by Russian and Chinese representatives at a top G20 officials meeting in Sydney.[[51]](#footnote-52) All of this is occurring while the BRICS nations are conducting heated negotiations for the inception of a BRICS bank, intended to serve as an alternative to the IMF and the World Bank. In light of these facts, the ‘economic isolation’ which the West threatens to impose on the Russian Federation could very well backfire in the most ironic possible manner.

Regarding the United Nations, in particular the UN Security Council, former President of Brazil Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva declared at the 63rd Session of the UN general assembly: ‘The United Nations has spent 15 years discussing the reform of its Security Council. Today’s structure has been frozen for six decades and does not relate to the challenges of today’s world. Its distorted form of representation stands between us and the multilateral world to which we aspire.’ [[52]](#footnote-53)

Not only has the UN power structure been extremely inflexible in expanding membership, but President Putin has a valid point when he argues that the US ‘force(s) the necessary resolutions from international organisations, and if for some reason this does not work, they simply ignore the UN Security Council and the UN overall.’ [[53]](#footnote-54) Certainly, if the United States has taken the liberty to ignore UN Security Council resolutions at will, this speaks very poorly of the authority and power of the organization.

**7.3: The eastward expansion of NATO**

‘[…] they have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact.This happened with NATO’s expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders. […] It happened with the deployment of a missile defence system. In spite of all our apprehensions, the project is working and moving forward.’[[54]](#footnote-55)

As surprising to Western rhetoric as this may be, Vladimir Putin once again has a valid point on this matter. It turns out that during the delicate negotiations over the reunification of Germany in the 1990s, Western powers promised then President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would expand ‘not one inch’ beyond the borders of East Germany.[[55]](#footnote-56) Almost a quarter of a century later, NATO has expanded into many countries which border the Russian Federation, some of which were part of the former Soviet bloc.

**7.3.1 NATO and its expansion during the Cold War**

‘The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created in 1949 by the United States, Canada, and several Western European nations to provide collective security against the Soviet Union.’[[56]](#footnote-57)

This is a direct quote from the archives of the US Department of State and it highlights the foundation of ongoing US-Russian tensions, namely the fact that NATO was originally created and its mechanisms designed to counter and combat Russia and its influence over the European mainland. The problem is that although the stated aims of the organization have changed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, its steady expansion towards the Russian border, the deployment of forward Western bases, military personnel and equipment would suggest otherwise.

NATO is a security and military cooperative organization spearheaded by the United States, and founded by the latter in association with Belgium, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, Canada and Iceland in 1949.[[57]](#footnote-58)

The organization expanded several times during the Cold-War period, eventually including Greece and Turkey in 1952, West Germany in 1955 and Spain in 1982. The last addition to NATO during the Soviet era occurred in 1990, as the reunification of Germany under Western conditions implied that the newly reassembled state would enjoy the same benefits as the previous West Germany, including its seat in the UN, its membership to NATO, European Communities etc. This was also the final adherence to NATO which Russia consented to as part of the US-Soviet negotiations, as Mikhail Gorbachev was instructed that the east-ward expansion would definitively cease.

**7.3.2 US Pledges to Gorbachev**

In an anarchic, cut-throat world, the verbal promises of foreign politicians are probably the most unreliable form of assurance one can depend on. Why, then, was the Soviet leadership so ready to embrace Western promises at the time?

In its defense, those promises seemed very realistic in the contemporary political context. At the time, the Warsaw Pact (the Soviet version of NATO, collective defense treaty between the Eastern bloc nations) had not yet been entirely disestablished. Despite the fact that key elements (Romania, Poland) were faltering, the organization was still functioning and it played a crucial role in negotiating the terms of the reunification of Germany. Eastern politicians did not envision the dissolution of this organization over such a short period of time (the Warsaw Pact was disbanded in early 1991) and thus they did not find a large-scale east-ward expansion of NATO even viable, let alone likely. Secondly, the Soviet Union was attempting to expedite the process of reunification in Germany because it had other pressing matters to tend to, such as various revolutions in its satellite regions and financial collapse. Therefore, relocating its troops and reducing military and administrative costs were a top priority. Besides, it seemed like the USSR was going to lose control over East Germany eventually because the German people were in the midst of revolting. Thus, the most effective course of action for the Soviet Union in the region was to cut its losses. Conclusively, the USSR did not require a written assurance of NATO’s membership limitation because its weakened position of negotiation did not afford it to insist on issues of extreme unlikeliness.

However, the fact still stands that the reunification process would not have been possible without Russian consent and cooperation, regardless of its internal political turmoil. With approximately 350.000 soldiers stationed in East Germany alone[[58]](#footnote-59), the Soviet Union had the ability to halt the process for an extended period of time, if not to prevent it altogether.

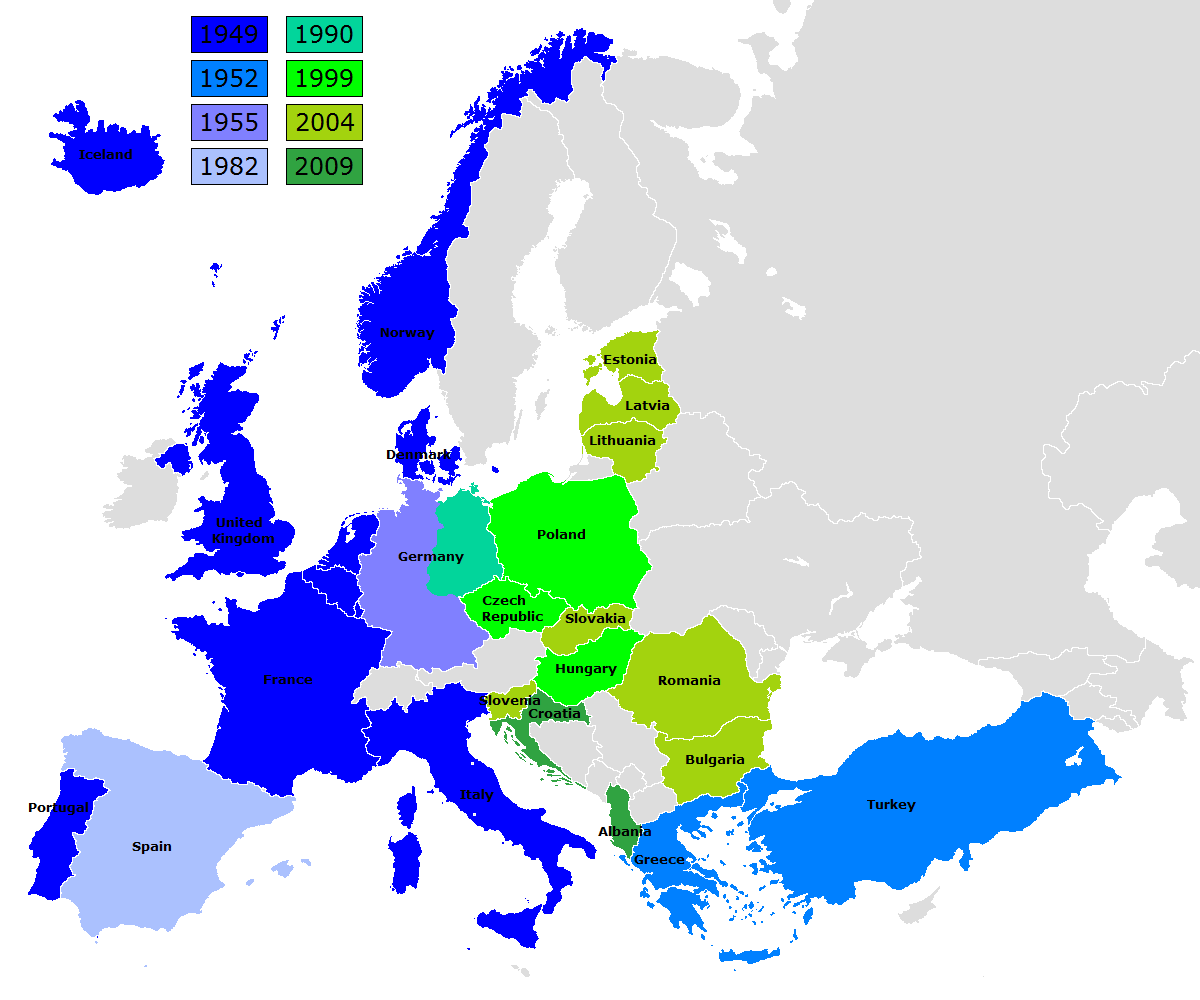
‘A diplomat with the German Foreign Ministry says that there was, of course, a consensus between the two sides. Indeed, the Soviets would hardly have agreed to take part in the two-plus-four talks\* if they had known that NATO would later accept Poland, Hungary and other Eastern European countries as members.’ [[59]](#footnote-60)

The US denies that the agreement limiting the expansion of NATO was ever concluded because it was never put into writing, therefore it was never valid. This series of arguments is simplified by the realist school, which suggests that treaties are essentially only relevant as long as all parties have an interest in respecting them. This perspective diminishes the importance of international agreements altogether, regardless of whether they are written or verbal. However, these agreements are still useful as analytical tools because they mirror the political incentives of the actors involved. In essence, the US’ verbal agreement with Russia in the 1990s not to expand NATO wasn’t in any way binding, but it was an expression of its intention not to be militarily aggressive towards the East. The logical conclusion is that the east-ward expansion of NATO can be interpreted as a sign of aggression in and of itself.

**7.3.3 NATO in the post-Cold War era**

NATO did indeed expand its membership after the dissolution of the USSR and it did so with more haste than most people realize. It only took the US 9 years to betray its promises to the Russians and include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into the NATO framework. By comparison, it took the international system over 15 years to conclude negotiations over European banana imports from Latin American countries.[[60]](#footnote-61) On a more serious (and relevant) note, the accession of Turkey to the European Union serves as the perfect example for a comparative timeline. Turkey has been recognized as an official applicant for membership to the EU in 1999, but the EU only agreed to start negotiations in 2004. In 2014, the negotiations are still ongoing, with a resolution being nowhere in sight.

Repeatedly ignoring Russian objections, NATO once again expanded its membership in 2004, this time including a significant number of states: Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Albania and, most notably (and perhaps most insultingly), the three Baltic States: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, former members of the USSR. By April 2009, NATO also accepted the membership of Albania and Croatia, the last nations to join the organization until the present day. Additionally, increasing the number of *de jure* members was complemented by the offering of MAP’s (Membership Action Plan – the preparatory stages of adherence to NATO) to countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia and IPAP’s (Individual Partnership Action Plans – cooperation agreements for countries who are indecisive about or inclined against joining NATO) to Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Montenegro.

There are several important points to take away from this series of events: Firstly, the haste with which NATO has expanded eastward suggests calculation and determination and is likely troubling to the Russian leadership. Secondly, as detailed in *Figure 2* below and regardless of stated intentions, the expansion of NATO reveals a trend of moving towards encircling the territories of the Russian Federation. NATO membership has rapidly been spreading eastward and the picture clearly shows that either Ukraine, Moldova or Belarus must have been the next milestone.

***Fig. 2***

Also, on the matter of trends, the expansion of NATO has not only been rapid, but also rather gradual. Starting with 1999, the organization has accepted new members every five years, in 2004 and lastly in 2009. Perhaps the fact that five more years have passed since the latest round of members was included has not escaped Russian policy makers, and might have played a role in their analysis (and ultimately their response) to the Ukrainian political crisis. If Russia regarded NATO’s course of action as a long-term strategy, it might have feared that it would attempt to include Ukraine, under the revolutionary interim government, in a hasty manner.

In light of the facts and analyses presented above, skepticism towards NATO’s enlargement is all but a given. However, this series of events looks bleaker still from the Russian point of view.

**7.3.4 The Russian Perspective**

Imagine a junior politician in early 1990s Russia. The window in his bedroom faces towards the West. He looks out every morning and sees the vast expanse of Russia’s fields, then Ukraine and Belarus, countries with a strong Russian influence. Further away several Eastern-European countries, in the midst of overwhelming reforms and far, far into the distance lays NATO, the enemy. He feels quite safe. As time passes, the window reveals that the enemy, despite its assurances, is advancing. After twenty-five years of watching this process occur, the politician looks out of the window and suddenly, the enemy is in the process of absorbing his neighboring country. As if that wasn’t bad enough, the vast Russian fields have also inexplicably shrunk...

The point to take away from this metaphor is not just that Russia feels surrounded and contained by US-friendly forces, but that it also does not share the Western view of the benignity of NATO’s expansion; quite the contrary, actually: The fact that NATO is pushing its troops and weapons closer to Russian territory is likely to create the perception of a threat which is, in reality, greatly exaggerated. This analysis begs the question of why the US has kept insisting on expanding NATO into Russia’s territorial vicinity in the first place. Certainly, someone in the US administration or NATO leadership must have considered the arguments presented above. It is therefore logical to assume that NATO has been acting out of malevolence rather than ignorance.

**7.3.5 ‘Nyet Means Nyet’**

The idea that the US and NATO were completely oblivious to the implications of their expansion towards the Russian border has in fact already been debunked. Thanks to Julian Assange’s Wikileaks, we now have access to a classified US State Department cable dated 1st of February 2008, sent by the US Embassy In Moscow, entitled ‘NYET MEANS NYET: RUSSIA’S NATO ENLARGEMENT REDLINES’. William J. Burns, then US ambassador to Moscow, wrote:

*‘Following a muted first reaction to Ukraine's intent to seek a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Bucharest summit (ref A), Foreign Minister Lavrov and other senior officials have reiterated strong opposition, stressing that Russia would view further eastward expansion as a potential military threat. NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains "an emotional and neuralgic" issue for Russia, but strategic policy considerations also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. In Ukraine, these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene.’ [[61]](#footnote-62)*

Not only was the US warned that the continued east-ward expansion of NATO is regarded as a military threat by the Russian government, it was even granted a precise and clear timeline of what would occur if plans for this expansion were to move forward. The last sentence is particularly relevant, seeing how, in retrospect, it accurately describes the Ukrainian conflict thus far. Notably, the expression ‘which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene’, uttered by a negotiator in Mr. Lavrov’s position, can be interpreted as the diplomatic approach to warning one’s counterpart of the consequences of his actions. Most likely, the Russian government had already considered how to handle the eventuality of Ukraine’s accession to NATO and it is a fair assumption that renouncing its main port in the Black Sea was unacceptable.

The most analytically significant statement which Burns noted in this cable states:

*‘While Russia might believe statements from the West that NATO was not directed against Russia, when one looked at recent military activities in NATO countries (establishment of U.S. forward operating locations, etc. they had to be evaluated* ***not by stated intentions but by potential****.[[62]](#footnote-63)*

This argument is paramount. The underlying explanation is that NATO does not pose a direct, contemporary military threat to Russia, and the latter is willing to accept this notion. The thought that NATO is expanding East with the intention of engaging in war against Russia is unlikely to all parties involved. However, this is irrelevant to the Russians for three reasons: Firstly, it is because a lack of intention of waging war is not equal to a valid assurance that war shall not be waged. Secondly, a strategic-realist overview would suggest that if Russia indeed allowed NATO to contain it militarily, the prospects of war for the US against Russia would change, because the cost-benefit analysis would look entirely different. At this point in time, the US can not contemplate a war against its former Cold War nemesis because the costs would greatly exceed the benefits. However, if the US had access to strategic positions and forward military bases in every direction around the Russian territory, the cost-benefit analysis would suddenly look much better. Lastly, direct military engagement is only the ultimate issue; the containment of Russia has the direct consequence of diminishing its power even without a military confrontation, because military power can be used as political leverage. Case in point, Russia threatened Poland with a nuclear attack if NATO went through with implementing a missile shield on its territory in 2008.[[63]](#footnote-64) If the missile shield was already in operation, Russia’s threats would have been less significant. Even if it hasn’t lost any power per-se, Russia has lost some of its ability to project its power in specific key regions. Conclusively, the *potential* of the implications of NATO’s expansion into Ukraine (and other bordering countries) is so great that it decisively outweighs the stated (or even the real) intentions.

**7.3.6 NATO and the lead-up to the Ukrainian Crisis**

The view that the West’s aggressive expansion might be causal to the Ukrainian crisis is generally ignored by the Western media. Some academics hold this opinion, however.

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger noted even before the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict that ‘*The European Union must recognize that its bureaucratic dilatoriness and subordination of the strategic element to domestic politics in negotiating Ukraine’s relationship to Europe contributed to turning a negotiation into a crisis. Foreign policy is the art of establishing priorities.*’[[64]](#footnote-65) He speaks little of the United States, however, who undertook serious steps towards introducing a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia and the Ukraine at the NATO Bucharest summit of 2008, being opposed by Britain and France[[65]](#footnote-66), which would have been a lead-up to their membership in the organization. While Ukraine was never formally offered a MAP by NATO, it did engage in something called the ‘Annual National Programmes of Ukraine-NATO cooperation’, an important strategic agreement which prompted Ukrainian Foreign Minister of the time Volodymyr Ohryzko to declare:

‘We have achieved the desired result at this stage: we have de facto been granted an action plan for preparing Ukraine for NATO membership. This is a serious step forward. We are moving ahead toward membership, and we're starting practical integration with NATO in 2009’[[66]](#footnote-67)

This statement is somewhat ironic in its wording, because one of the most consistent facts of Ukrainian society over time, revealed through numerous polls[[67]](#footnote-68)[[68]](#footnote-69), is that the general citizenry not only does not wish to accede to NATO, but also that approximately 40% of the population associates NATO with threat rather than protection\*. Despite this ‘minor’ inconvenience, Ukraine has been flirting with the consideration of NATO membership since 2005, in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution and the rise to power of pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko. As pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych assumed office in 2010, he scrapped the plans for NATO membership, proposing closer ties with the East instead. The point to take away here is that there are key actors in the Ukrainian political and financial elite which strongly advocate for NATO membership and European integration and some actors which would drift the country towards Moscow’s sphere of influence. In essence, the internal political turmoil of Ukraine is a reflection of US-Russian disputes over their influence in the region.

**7.3.7 Additional implications of the expansion of NATO to Russian foreign policy**

The fact that Russia would feel threatened by the aggressive expansion of a military alliance specifically created for the purpose to combat and contain it is understandable. Unfortunately, the recklessness of US foreign politics doesn’t end here.

The United States has also been insisting on implementing anti-ballistic missile capabilities in European countries, specifically in the Spanish peninsula and close to the Russian borders, namely in Poland and Romania, including some elements in Turkey. [[69]](#footnote-70) Such weapons are of particular significance because they are able to deter nuclear warheads. When the plans were brought up by the Bush administration in the beginning of the millennium, the official purpose was to protect the European nations from potential missile attacks from ‘terrorists’ and ‘rogue nations’ such as Iran, Iraq and North Korea. While this threat was hardly credible back in 2001, when Eastern Europe had absolutely no quarrel with either of the aforementioned nations, it is even more devoid of substance today, as Iraq has been invaded and secured by America and Iran is approaching a nuclear pact, while North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities have proven time and time again to be of little concern to the international system, especially Eastern Europe. The Russians are well aware of the threat this military deployment represents and have been protesting against it vehemently, going as far as threatening Poland with nuclear force. Upgrades and developments have continued regardless, making relations between the two former Cold War enemies even more tense as Eastern Europe arms itself with antiballistic missiles.

Additionally, expanding NATO membership is accompanied by a certain set of perks for the United States, including forward bases which can be used by the US military as outposts in the eventuality of a conflict, the sharing of sensitive information and data, access to the region for the purpose of military exercises and drills, the ability to deploy military personnel and equipment as well as a general subordination of some of the new members’ foreign policies to the NATO chain of command.

The most relevant recent events orchestrated by NATO which have had an impact on the Ukrainian crisis are ‘Operation Steadfast Jazz’ and ‘Operation Rapid Trident’. The former refers to a series of large-scale military exercises in Poland and the Baltic states with over 6000 NATO troops participating. [[70]](#footnote-71) Coincidentally, perhaps, this series of drills began on the 2nd of November 2013, a mere few weeks prior to the outbreak of the Ukrainian protests. This particular set of circumstances is likely to have made Russia wary of how the situation was developing. Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov stated that ‘these drills are in the spirit of the Cold War’[[71]](#footnote-72). The official NATO statement is that the exercise is ‘based on a fictitious scenario in a fictitious country’ but it is not a stretch to argue that it simulates a Russian invasion of the region.

The second military exercise organized by NATO is code-named ‘Rapid Trident’. This yearly series of operations has been in place since the summer of 2011 and it is based in Ukraine, with involvement of soldiers and Special Forces from 17 nations (including several non-NATO members, such as Moldova and Georgia). Notably, Russia is not a participant. While this series of drills may involve fewer troops and equipment than the ‘Steadfast Jazz’ (the former involves only around 1700 soldiers[[72]](#footnote-73)), it has the added significance of taking place on Ukrainian soil, a country which was technically still under Russia’s sphere of influence at the time.

It is important to note that neither of these military exercises are a direct threat to Russia per-se, though the trend of ever more frequent Western operations in the region is rather worrisome. They are, however, provocative by nature and may represent a threat to Russian interests in the near abroad.

It is safe to assume that NATO is extremely unlikely to use the pretext of arranging these exercises to initiate a military conflict against Russia, simply because the scale of a drill which could transform into a serious threat to Moscow would have to be so extraordinary that it would most certainly attract international attention and criticism. However, there is an additional problem which needs to be considered.

One of the reasons why Putin was able to invade and annex Crimea so quickly and bloodlessly is because he met very little, unarmed opposition. What would have happened if the coup d’état had taken place while the ‘Rapid Trident’ exercises were being conducted by NATO close to the Crimean Peninsula? As the alliance was already in the country, it could have unilaterally assumed the role of ‘protector’ and ‘peacekeeper’ as it did in Kosovo and Russia would have had to either renounce its port in Sevastopol or engage in military conflict with the West (while also taking a huge blow to its international image because it would have been forced into a first strike). Conclusively, these military exercises, designed to ‘promote regional stability and security’[[73]](#footnote-74), had the opposite effect and the consequences were transparent and predictable.

**7.3.8 Addendum**

In conclusion to this chapter, it is important to note that many of the statements presented above are drawn with a tint of anti-western emphasis, although neither the paper nor the author supports these views. The underlying argument is not that the West is unilaterally responsible for the Ukrainian conflict, but that the spiral of relations between the West and Russia, in the context of international relations, has been naturally leading up to this crisis. The focus is therefore shifted onto the systemic nature of IR and how this system would inadvertently have led to the ongoing conflict sooner or later: US and Russian interests were simply meant to clash in Ukraine. The reason why many chapters seem slightly Eastern-biased is because the entire paper is based on debunking Western rhetoric which suggests that the Ukrainian conflict is all to blame on Russia being a warmongering, irrational and imperialistic nation. Therefore, there is no need to analyze the system beyond criticizing Western foreign policy, because the paper does not attempt to take sides regarding who is to blame, but rather attempts to argue that the inception of this crisis is systemic to East-West relations.

Nevertheless, I feel it is imperative to mention that US foreign policy is not unilaterally responsible for the escalation of tensions with Russia. For example, this chapter criticizes the US’ arming of Poland as a provocation towards Russia. However, it ignores the fact that the missile shield was being constructed at Poland’s request, and in the circumstances of the Russian invasion of Georgia, which gave rise to fears of invasion in neighboring countries. Both The Second Georgian War of 2008 and Poland’s fear of a Russian invasion can be traced back to a multitude of conflicts and tensions which pre-determined the outcomes of contemporary politics to a certain degree, thus highlighting the systemic nature IR.

**8. The Ukrainian crisis and the US’ response, its competency and effectiveness**

The aforementioned series of events has eventually led to the current political and economic crisis in Ukraine. Despite Western rhetoric about Putin being an irrational, warmongering actor, the previous chapters clearly outline an evolving trend of interference through various means by the US in Russia’s eco-political situation.

It is important to keep in mind that political instability and corruption have been defining traits of Ukrainian political history since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, not much unlike the case of some of its Eastern EU members like Romania and Bulgaria. This being said, the recent political turmoil is largely attributed to the European Union pushing Russia by attempting to integrate Ukraine into its organizational structure (through the signing of an Association Agreement), and Russia pushing back through its creation of a Eurasian Customs Union with several other pre-Soviet states and attempting to impose itself on Ukraine. While the EU agreement was more appealing to the majority of the Ukrainian population, which seeks rapprochement with the West, Russia was in a position to offer a much better deal which would require fewer organizational changes to the nation and also in a position to bully its neighbor due to its dependence on gas, energy and preferential trade status. [[74]](#footnote-75)

As Ukraine’s former president, Viktor Yanukovych, decided to accept an economic partnership with Russia (not including the joining of the customs union), intensive protests sparked in the capital of Kyiv which eventually turned violent and concluded with approximately 80 casualties (estimates vary)[[75]](#footnote-76). It is important to note that the West blames the Yanukovych administration for the shootings while Russia and Viktor Yanukovych himself blame pro-Western activists. It is also important to keep in mind that Yanukovych had nothing to gain and everything to lose from ordering fire upon his people. Also, several interesting private calls were leaked, most notably one between Lady Ashton and Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, arguing that the Maidan snipers were firing at both the police and the protesters in an apparent attempt to escalate the conflict[[76]](#footnote-77) and another between US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt, US ambassador to Ukraine discussing Washington support for a new, US-backed government in Ukraine.[[77]](#footnote-78) The pro-Western opposition eventually took over the parliament and ousted President Yanukovych from power, the latter fleeing to Eastern Ukraine and eventually to Russia. As the situation was developing, Russia invaded the Crimean peninsula, held a referendum over its independence and eventual annexation to Russia and absorbed its territory, forcing Ukrainian forces to withdraw from its borders. It is noteworthy that there were no initial casualties in this ‘invasion’, if the terminology is even accurate. Most of Crimea’s inhabitants are ethnically Russian and, as previously mentioned, 97% use Russian as their primary language and they mostly welcomed the Russian presence.

A single glance at a map of the region reveals that Crimea is a vital component of Russian geo-political strategy, not to mention the fact that the city of Sevastopol is the home of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. The fact that the West expected Russia to allow such a strategic territory to fall into European hands is simply naïve. In fact, Crimea has been traditionally part of Russia, being transferred to the Ukrainian republic in 1954 as a symbolic gesture, in the sense that the Soviet Union had just as much control and authority over the region as it did before the change. [[78]](#footnote-79) The fact that the Soviet Union might break apart and that the US-led enemy coalition might seize Crimea was never considered.

Regardless thereof, the Western powers reacted by demonizing Putin and trying to cover up the fact that much of Russian policy, at least throughout this crisis, is either provoked by them through the backing of Ukraine’s access to the EU (which doesn’t **necessarily** come hand in hand with NATO, but it does include its own security strategies and guarantees) or heavily influenced by the systemic nature of international relations. I believe that this is a rather poor reaction on the part of the United States. Publicly criticizing and undermining one’s international opponents is a national strategy used to gain public support from the local population and pre-existing allies, while the only impact on the adversaries is the potential escalation of the conflict. In short, smearing media campaigns are useful tools during times of war; not so much in this scenario. In fact, the US should probably refrain from demonizing comments altogether and rather focus on constructive ways to de-escalate the situation.

The US then pushed the EU into imposing sanctions on several Russian and Crimean officials by withdrawing their entry visa into their countries and freezing their offshore assets. These sanctions were already mentioned in Chapter 2 of this paper and do not require more in-depth analysis because they do not represent a genuine reaction to the crisis for anyone, period. I sincerely doubt that even the uneducated population in the West holds them in any regard, seeing how they don’t even target the Russian President (which would be yet another detrimental strategy to the US). Rather, the somewhat more significant aspect to take away from Western policy is the threat of further sanctions. However, I am fairly confident that Mr. Putin’s administration has foreseen these threats and was probably not intending to invade Ukraine in the first place. Instead, he is putting pressure on the West by placing infantry and military vehicles close to Ukraine’s borders, so that he may eventually use the withdrawal of these military capabilities as a bargaining chip in negotiating how the situation is going to stabilize. This is something UK Defense Secretary Phillip Hammond called ‘the classic Russian military doctrine (which) advocates escalating in order to de-escalate’ [[79]](#footnote-80) However, overall, the US must take responsibility for the fact that Russian nuclear-capable warheads were placed close to the Polish border only after the missile defense systems were implemented, and this strategy of Russian containment and encircling is inevitably going to provoke Putin into rash actions such as the Crimean intervention.

One of the subsequent actions undertaken by the US in reaction to this crisis was the expulsion of Russia from the G8 group. Such as with the sanctions on the Russian individuals, this strategy actually denotes the **lack** of a comprehensive strategy. Russia doesn’t need to participate in the G7, because the G20 is an overarching economic forum which includes all the members in G7, as well as other more important players. Russia’s voice is definitely more influential in the G20, where other major powers are also discontent with the global economic status quo.

Possibly the only action worthy of merit undertaken by the US so far has been discouraging Georgian and Ukrainian membership to NATO. [[80]](#footnote-81) Someone in the administration must have finally awoken to realize that US-backed eco-political imperialism (propagated by the EU and NATO) further into Russia’s sphere of influence is likely to be met with Russian Realpolitik.

The overarching conclusion is that the US is forced to react, but at the same time it is very limited in its ability to do so in an effective manner. Russia is too valuable a partner, both economically (EU energy dependence), politically (nuclear negotiations with Iran, North Korea) and militarily (cooperation with NATO in Afghanistan). Furthermore, conceding Crimea to the Russians would be an acceptable trade if the integrity of Ukraine was guaranteed. Ultimately, the people of Crimea themselves clearly prefer being part of the Russian Federation and, as long as the US doesn’t plan on invading Russia militarily any time soon, the Crimean peninsula offers little strategic benefit to the US or the West overall, compared to the risks associated with it.[[81]](#footnote-82)

**9. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the ongoing Ukrainian conflict seems to be caused and influenced by the long-term trend of relations between Russia and the United States to a great extent. Russia was able to abuse Ukraine’s economic dependence and corrupt political society into fostering influence in the region, gaining preferential economic bargains, security assurances and a buffer state between its borders and NATO. The US, on the other hand, pushed NATO ever East-ward, pursuing its long-term Cold War strategy of containment. The benignity of NATO’s expansionist tendencies was refuted in chapter 7.3.5 (Nyet Means Nyet), therefore, these tendencies must be aggressive by nature, or at the very least provocative. At the same time, the EU’s economic interests in the region converged with those of the US and they were able to function in tandem by representing ‘the West’ and Western integration. The interests of the West and the East clashed in Ukraine in late 2013, when Viktor Yanukovych was forced to choose between competing offers from the two superpowers regarding his country’s necessary bailout to save its crumbling economy and pay off some of its outstanding debts. To his credit, the President had attempted to bargain a trilateral agreement with Russia and the EU, but the EU deemed this prospect as unfeasible. Consequently, the deep political divide escalated from protests to violence and eventually to gunshots and firebombs finally leading to a successful, pro-Western coup d’état.

As demonstrated in this paper, the series of events which has transpired was largely predictable, both from a wider analysis of long-term US-Russian relations, as well as from actual diplomatic sources from inside the US State department, obtained by the (former) US ambassador to Russia William J. Burns. As far as the realist school is concerned, this is neither good nor bad; it is simply to be expected, as extended periods of peace are merely interludes between conflicts.

What is significant, however, is that the proven relevance of a realist analysis of US-Russian relations to the causes of the Ukrainian conflict can help predict the outcomes of the crisis. Mind you, these predictions are in no way certain, as there are many details which the author has chosen to disregard due to theoretical constraints, as well as a great deal of information related to the conflict which is going to be kept secret for decades to come. Nevertheless, if there was anything to learn from historical interactions between the US and Russia, it is that tensions between the superpowers tend to rise and fall based on ongoing political events. The US initially imposed sanctions on Russia for the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, but later dismissed them in 2010 under the Obama administration. This trend of constant tension with occasional spikes is likely to continue, complemented by the fact that, as UK Defense Secretary Philip Hammond stated ‘Russian military doctrine advocates escalating in order to de-escalate’

It is important to keep in mind, however, that different conflicts have different outcomes. While Russia may have achieved its goals quite successfully in Georgia, it seems to have drawn the short straw in the Ukrainian conflict, having lost (perhaps irrecoverably) too much influence in the region at the cost of the Crimean Peninsula, which it controlled by proxy and through economic incentives even before the crisis broke out. In the coming months of the conflict, following this pattern of analysis, Russia is likely to cut its losses and seek a favorable way out of the conflict. Speculatively, the Russian government will attempt to employ its unique channels of communication with the ‘independent pro-Russian protesters’ in the East to barter a favorable deal for the region, and implicitly for itself, while redeeming its international image (to a limited degree) by acting as a voluntary mediator.

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