



## Politics of Offensive-Realism and Economy in Russia's Decision to Invade Ukraine (2022) and its Impacts

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### Abstract

The politics of self-defense from external threats is one of the reasons why Putin decided to invade Ukraine in 2022, to aggressively contain NATO's potential expansion to the East when viewed from John Mearsheimer's offensive realism perspective. This perspective helps interpret Russia's aggressive geopolitical behavior as an attempt to protect itself against what it sees as a potentially pressing threat. The expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union has increasingly strained Russia's geopolitical security. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, in response to NATO's pressure, has also faced internal political turmoil (such as the Wagner coup) and international economic pressure through sanctions. Nevertheless, a government supported by oligarchs, Siloviki, and energy interests, along with the interconnectedness among these groups, has kept Russia's political economy functioning during this war. Through a literature review, these political, military, and economic contexts are important to analyze the implications of the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022. The literature collected comes not only from media publications in NATO countries but also from Russian media publications. This is to answer how the offensive realism perspective explains Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022 and how these factors shape the political, military, and international economic impacts of the war. In conclusion, Russia uses the narrative of defending itself against potential threats associated with Ukraine's interest in NATO membership to justify its 2022 military operations, while oligarchs and energy interests play a role in maintaining political instability between Wagner and the Kremlin.

## INTRODUCTION

War is shaped not only by motives of economic expansion but also by serious and immediate threats to territorial security and geo-economy. A state may justify war on specific, substantial, and legal grounds (*jus ad bellum*, or the right to war) when it acts in self-defense. The most compelling justifications for war typically include self-defense, nationalism with historical roots, and national security interests. One of which is the war between Russia and Ukraine, which took place on February 24, 2022, with the announcement of a military operation by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

One significant factor in Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 was Ukraine's internal political aspiration to pivot toward the West, particularly toward NATO and the European Union (Piver, 2023). On February 9, 1990, James A. Baker, the Secretary of State for the United States, met with Mikhail Gorbachev to talk about bringing Germany back together. Baker said at the meeting, "If we stay in Germany, which is part of NATO, NATO forces will not be able to extend their jurisdiction one inch to the east" (Sauvage, 2022). However, this statement was neither a legal guarantee nor a binding agreement (McCarthy, 2024). Its interpretation has also been widely debated, as the assurance mainly referred to the placement of NATO troops in East Germany rather than a broader promise that NATO would refrain from expanding to the east, and NATO has always remained open to new members (Pifer, 2014).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO's expansion to the East has accelerated, with 16 countries joining NATO to date, including some former Warsaw Pact countries (Sauvage, 2022). Since Ukraine broke away from the Soviet Union in 1991, relations with Western countries have been established, including with NATO as a counterbalance to its relations with Russia. In 1997, NATO and Ukraine signed an agreement (the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Ukraine) that established that NATO would protect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Piver, 2023).

From 2002 to 2008, Ukraine attempted to join NATO, but it has never succeeded. In the 2004 elections, Viktor Yushchenko became the president-elect (2005-2010), with Viktor Yanukovych as one of the prime ministers appointed by the president and the parliament. The proposed Membership Action Plan in Bucharest in 2006-2008 marked the beginning of closer discussions on NATO membership. However, NATO only stipulates that Ukraine "will become a member" and provides clarity on how Ukraine's NATO membership will proceed (Piver, 2023).

Ukraine's move to join NATO and the European Union is to defend itself from Russia's regional power, but it is also a danger to Russia itself and the Putin regime. In this case, it aligns with Mearsheimer's theory that increased security in one country can lead to decreased security in another country (Mearsheimer, 2001). After Viktor Yanukovych assumed office as the fourth president in 2010, Ukraine pursued efforts to reestablish its relations with Russia. During the same period, Russia dismissed Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO and the European Union and actively obstructed Ukraine's attempts to engage in the Membership Action Plan. When Ukraine sought to join the European Union in 2013 through the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, Russia feared that Ukraine's accession to

the European Union would prompt a radical shift in Ukraine's economic policy, potentially taking it out of Russia's sphere of influence. Therefore, Russia threatened to stop imports from Ukraine and raise the price of energy exports to Ukraine, prompting Yanukovich to cancel the agreement finally. However, because of this, Yanukovich finally faced the Maidan protests, which led him to flee in 2014. Ukraine then elected Petro Poroshenko as president, who reaffirmed Ukraine's intention to pursue NATO membership. Finally, Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, which then influenced other regions to gain independence from Ukraine (Piver, 2023).

Petro Poroshenko, the president of Ukraine (2014-2019), also pursued Ukraine's NATO membership. In 2016, NATO itself established a "trust fund" to support Ukraine's military development. After the May 2019 election, similar to Yushchenko and Poroshenko, Zelenskyy further deepened Ukraine's desire to join NATO. Zelenskyy continued to pressure NATO to provide an answer, but most NATO countries responded silently. Russia has viewed this relationship as too far since the NATO-Ukraine meeting in Bucharest, Romania, in 2018, prompting Putin to decide to conduct a "special military operation" in Ukraine in February 2022 (Piver, 2023).

This research finds that the geopolitical and power dynamics driving Russia's aggression against Ukraine are rooted in historical context and NATO's pressure on Russia's neighboring countries, which challenges the political explanation of Russian expansionism as the primary rationale for this invasion. Much empirical evidence links the Russia-Ukraine War to preventing the Kyiv regime from becoming a NATO member and thereby escalating tensions (Kirby, 2025), but little links it to theories of geopolitical behavior. In addition, the research highlights a series of economic and political repercussions at international and regional levels, including sanctions and energy trade, as well as on a national scale, regarding the role of oligarchs and the Wagner coup.

## METHODS

This research is descriptive-qualitative research that systematically connects a series of empirical phenomena into a theoretical framework. This research outlines the geopolitical policies of Russia and NATO and the interactions between them through the lens of offensive-realism theory abstracted from Putin's speeches, history, economic data, and geopolitical facts. The data for this paper was collected using secondary studies, namely literature studies consisting of scientific journals, books, the internet, official agency reports, and others. The literature was collected from two literature and media bases that were considered to represent the NATO and Ukrainian perspectives, as well as the Russian perspective in a balanced way; this was because the study was analyzing a war policy that is subject to conflicts of interest in truth reporting. Data analysis is done in a mixture of deductive and inductive to see the phenomenon based on the theory used. This research seeks to answer the question: How did NATO's geopolitical policy to the East push Russia to act aggressively towards Ukraine and the domestic and international political-economic impact of Russia's actions?

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exposing the geopolitical dilemma Russia perceives regarding Ukraine is essential to understanding its offensive behavior in 2022. Within the critical geopolitics paradigm, scholars interpret geopolitical behavior as a discourse that constructs perceived truths rather than as a neutral or detached description of an objective reality (Dodds, 2001; Tuathail et al., 2003). Regarding discourse, Foucault (1977) argues that political power continuously produces forms of knowledge and discourse that serve to validate and reinforce its authority. An example of this is Russia's development of the concept of the "Near Abroad," which functions as a discursive tool to justify intervention in post-Soviet states. In the same way, Russia uses the "NATO dilemma" and the Near Abroad story in Ukraine as security threats to justify its aggressive actions, such as what it calls "special military operations" in Ukraine. Putin contends that this predicament necessitates immediate intervention to prevent Ukraine from becoming a critical juncture in NATO's alliance framework (Kirby, 2025; President of Russia, 2024).

The theory of offensive realism provides a useful analytical lens for understanding the strategy and prospects of the Russian Federation's response to security issues in its buffer region, Ukraine, and why Russia chose to invade. John J. Mearsheimer wrote about this theory in Chapter II of his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001). It explains how great powers strive to gain as much power as possible relative to their rivals. The framework explains and contextualizes Russia's strategic behavior as an attempt to protect itself against what it perceives to be NATO's encroachment on its status as a great power.

According to Mearsheimer (2001), every great power has rational incentives to behave aggressively. States can never be sure of others' intentions. In an anarchic international system, a state cannot guarantee that its territory will remain secure tomorrow, even if its leader's exchanged handshakes and agreements with others yesterday. Alliance's shift, partners become adversaries, and adversaries become partners. Under such uncertainty, states often view offensive action as self-defense, preempting perceived threats to protect themselves. Since 2014, Russia has intensified military efforts aimed at asserting what it views as its territorial sovereignty against perceived threats from NATO, a bloc it frequently equates with the West. In this narrative, Russia positions Ukraine as one of the most potent and dangerous NATO proxies near its borders. A formal analogy captures this logic: when an individual perceives that someone standing next to him is holding a knife and preparing to strike, he may act first to neutralize the threat as a form of self-defense. In Russia's strategic reasoning, its military actions toward Ukraine reflect this preemptive security logic.

Second, major powers often respond to crises by seeking hegemonic dominance and eliminating surrounding challenges. Mearsheimer (2001) argues that even when a significant power lacks the full capability to become a global or regional hegemon, it will still behave aggressively, accumulating as much strength as possible to survive. In this logic, powerful states maximize their strategic advantages even when doing so requires deception, coercion, or the use of force against other states. Conversely, great powers consistently work to prevent rivals from gaining strategic advantages, making lasting

peace nearly impossible (Mearsheimer, 2001). These propositions of offensive realism form the theoretical foundation of the present analysis of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, with particular emphasis on the first proposition. This analysis also looks at the second and third propositions to see how they apply to the current situation.

If Ukraine were to join NATO, alliance members would be required to provide military support to Ukraine under Article 3 of the NATO Treaty. This article emphasizes that member states must develop their individual and collective capacities to resist armed attacks through continuous self-help and mutual assistance. Such an obligation would significantly alter the strategic landscape around Ukraine, especially for Russia. Under these conditions, the United States or NATO could potentially deploy nuclear weapons or long-range missiles in Ukraine, systems already demonstrated in the ongoing war that could reach Moscow. Russia views the possibility as an existential threat not only to its national security but also to the longevity of the Putin government. Putin has repeatedly criticized NATO for exploiting post-Soviet political transitions to expand its influence eastward (Pifer, 2014).

From the Russian perspective, Russia justifies its attack on Ukraine as an effort to neutralize a potential military threat that it believes would emerge if Ukraine became a full NATO member. In an anarchic international system, Russia argues that every state must recognize that NATO expansion will have repercussions, despite assurances offered by NATO and pro-Ukrainian voices. As Mearsheimer (2001) notes, great powers often operate under a "zero-sum" mindset, in which the strategic gain of one side is a direct loss for the other. Western states, however, condemn Russia's invasion and have imposed extensive economic and political sanctions, framing Russia's actions as an unjustified assault on a sovereign nation. However, Putin's decision aligns with a long-standing international pattern in which states act aggressively to counter perceived threats, an idea central to Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism.

Russia sees Ukraine as a part of Russia because they share a language, ethnicity, and history. This connection persisted until the political rupture surrounding President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014. Russia argues that NATO's expanding influence in Eastern Europe and Ukraine's pro-NATO and pro-EU stance compromise its national security. From Russia's point of view, it is not only possible but also likely that NATO troops will be stationed in Ukraine. Mearsheimer (2001) contends that great powers recognize hegemony as the most secure position and therefore seek to eliminate emerging challenges posed by rival great powers. Russia's actions reflect this logic as it seeks to maintain regional dominance and limit NATO's encroachment.

Within the dynamics of international realism and international anarchy, Putin seeks to demonstrate through the war that no single state or alliance should dominate the international system. He frames the conflict as an effort to restore a balance of power between Russia and the United States, or between Russia and NATO. Although the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact collapsed, leaving the United States and its allies as the apparent victors, Russia argues that their defeat does not grant them the authority to shape global politics unilaterally. From Putin's perspective, Ukraine's pursuit of European Union or NATO membership poses a direct national security threat to Russia as its

immediate neighbor. As Mearsheimer theorizes, this paper argues that Putin directs his military actions not toward territorial expansion but toward self-defense, seeking to prevent a rival great power, NATO, from establishing a strategic foothold in what Russia considers its buffer region and near abroad.

Mearsheimer (2001, p. 31) says, "Survival dominates other motives because, once a country is conquered, it is unlikely that it will be in a position to pursue other goals." Russia intends to conquer Ukraine to prevent it from pursuing NATO membership, which Russia views as a potential threat. Prof. Stephen Kotkin explained that Putin believes Russia is entitled to influence the Near Abroad region. Suppose Russia does not attack Ukraine to prevent its desire to join NATO. In that case, Ukraine may become a platform or proxy for the West (NATO) to undermine Russia, as the West did in promoting the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Moskowitz, 2023). The argument of self-defense and survival is proven based on the political statements in Putin's speech on February 24, 2022:

"...threat that irresponsible Western politicians are creating against Russia in a consistent... I am referring to NATO's eastward expansion" (Schmitt, 2022).

As Schmitt (2022) notes, "...NATO's leadership has been frank in its statements that it needs to accelerate and increase efforts to bring the alliance's infrastructure closer to Russia's borders. We cannot just stand by and passively observe these developments." (Schmitt, 2022).

"I reiterate: We are acting to defend ourselves from the threats created for us and from a worse peril than what is happening now" (President of Russia, 2024).

This study departs from earlier scholarship by consistently applying the perspective of offensive realism within the neorealist tradition to explain Russia's decision-making in the Russian and Ukrainian conflict. Through this lens, Russia's actions are interpreted not as a simple effort to invade Ukraine, but as anticipatory self-defense against the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO, a scenario that Moscow views as a direct security risk under the logic of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk on February 21, 2022, also shaped its interpretation of Ukraine's potential law enforcement measures against separatist groups, which Russia viewed as aggression due to what it considered a valid defense agreement with the two regions (Iswara, 2022). Ukraine's possible accession to NATO would further extend the Article 5 collective defense principle to its territory, giving Kyiv greater confidence while simultaneously heightening Russia's perception of threat. As Mearsheimer (2001) notes, "it is difficult for a country to increase its chances of survival without threatening the survival of other countries," which captures how the expansion of Ukraine's military capabilities through NATO membership could intensify Russia's security concerns and reinforce the broader security dilemma.

Mearsheimer (2001) argues that offensive actions between states are driven by three factors: fear of other states' intentions and capabilities, the logic of self-help rooted in state egoism, and the effort to maximize power. Russia's attack on Ukraine reflects all three factors. However, the first two provide a stronger explanation than the third, since the pursuit of power maximization would be exceptionally risky for Russia even if it aligns with Putin's broader vision of a Greater Russia. From this perspective, the invasion was an attempt to prevent a repetition of past historical traumas, such as the French invasion

under Napoleon or Germany's attack on the Soviet Union. Russia sees no alternative but to move first to avoid a future attack that it believes could occur if NATO expands further eastward. In recent decades, only Belarus has remained as a buffer zone that shows no intention of joining NATO, which increases Russia's sense of vulnerability. The situation also means Putin cannot trust or verify President Zelenskyy's continued commitment to pursuing NATO membership, and this uncertainty further intensifies Russia's fear.

Russia started a military operation to force Ukraine to back down from its plans to join NATO before NATO or Ukraine could do anything that Russia saw as similar to Napoleon or Hitler's invasions. NATO has also put off letting Ukraine join because it would put the alliance in a very dangerous strategic position. If NATO let Ukraine join, it would have to confront Russia, which might include responding to Russia's nuclear capabilities. Most NATO members think such an act is unnecessary and not in their national interests. Russia will probably only go against NATO if NATO directly threatens Russia's most important strategic interests. People who think this way say that Putin's fear of NATO expansion is a reason for Russia's attacks on Ukraine. Putin said these words in response to NATO's plan to get involved in the Russia-Ukraine war on February 29, 2024:

"We need to shore up the forces in the western strategic theater to counteract the threat posed by NATO's eastward expansion with the joining of Sweden and Finland into the alliance" (President of Russia, 2024).

They talked about the possibility of sending a NATO military contingent to Ukraine. We remember what happened to those who once sent their contingents to the territory of our country. Now, the invaders will suffer far more tragic consequences. They must understand that we also have weapons that can hit targets in their territory (Ebel & Dixon, 2024).

Article 5 of the NATO treaty states that an armed attack on any NATO member is considered an attack on all members. Mearsheimer (2001) argues that states behave as rational actors, and NATO demonstrated such rationality by postponing Ukraine's membership during the ongoing conflict. Admitting Ukraine currently would force NATO countries to confront Russia directly, a scenario many members consider incompatible with their long-term national interests. It is unlikely that NATO states would willingly enter a war with Russia, especially given Russia's ties with powerful partners such as China and North Korea. Bringing Ukraine into NATO would draw the entire alliance into a confrontation with Russia, a course of action that is neither strategically sound nor rational for any party involved. As Chivvis (2024) notes, Ukraine's accession to NATO could ultimately prove detrimental for both Ukraine and the alliance. Russia also perceives itself as isolated amid NATO's expansion. Under conditions of international anarchy, no external actor can guarantee Russia's security. Consistent with Mearsheimer's (2001) argument that every state is ultimately responsible for its survival, Russia believes it must rely on its capabilities to prevent NATO weapons from approaching its borders. This sense of vulnerability has encouraged Russia to act decisively to safeguard what it views as its core security interests. A third factor shaping Russia's behavior is the desire to preserve influence over former Soviet states and the surrounding region. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia's power relative to NATO has grown.

Mearsheimer (2001) argues that major powers will exert significant effort to maintain or increase their standing vis-à-vis political rivals. From this perspective, the invasion of Ukraine reflects an attempt not only to secure Russia's dominance in Eurasia but also to reinforce Putin's political authority at home. As Ukraine continues to pursue NATO membership, Russia remains determined to prevent what it views as a direct threat to its borders. This dynamic reinforces the idea that Ukraine has become a battleground for the deeper conflict between Russia and NATO.

Putin has also framed the conflict in historical and cultural terms, arguing that Russia and Ukraine have been a single nation since the late ninth century. In an interview with United States television host Tucker Carlson, he described Ukraine as an "artificial country." From President Zelenskyy's perspective, Putin seeks to replace Ukraine's leadership with figures more aligned with Russian interests, including Viktor Medvedchuk (Kirby, 2025). These conflicting narratives show that the war is about both Russia's national defense and the political power struggle between Kyiv and the Kremlin.

### **Regional Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War**

The regional impact of the Russia-Ukraine war is shaped by a constellation of geopolitical, ideological, and economic considerations that motivated Russia to launch its invasion in 2022. Geopolitically, Russia views Ukraine's increasing alignment with the West, especially its intention to join NATO, as a direct threat to its national security (Syahbuddin & Haryati, 2022). For decades, Moscow has interpreted NATO's expansion toward the east as an effort by Western powers to encircle its territory. This perception has driven Russia to annex Crimea and support separatist movements in the Donbas as part of a broader attempt to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence and prevent NATO from expanding toward its borders (Syahbuddin & Haryati, 2022). Putin's political outlook on Ukraine is also influenced by the Brezhnev Doctrine, which emphasizes the necessity of maintaining influence over former Soviet republics to preserve regional stability. From this perspective, losing Ukraine would weaken Russia's strategic foothold in Eastern Europe and potentially allow NATO to enter a region Moscow considers highly sensitive (Akbar et al., 2023).

From an economic perspective, Russia's position as a major energy supplier to Europe significantly shapes its strategic posture. Russia has long used oil and gas exports as a form of geopolitical leverage. In response to Western sanctions, it restricted energy flows to Europe, triggering an energy crisis and contributing to global inflation (Prasetyo et al., 2024). The disruption of global supply chains, especially those that involve the Black Sea, has further intensified inflation and driven up the prices of essential commodities such as food and minerals (Prasetyo et al., 2024).

These economic pressures reverberate worldwide, demonstrating how the conflict's effects extend far beyond the battlefield. The consequences of the invasion are far-reaching, including a deepening humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, intensified geopolitical tensions between Russia and Western countries, and significant economic disruptions within Europe, which relies heavily on Russian energy (Prasetyo et al., 2024). Rising energy and commodity prices have fueled global inflation, reducing purchasing

power and creating financial uncertainty in many regions (Prasetyo et al., 2024). The conflict has also strengthened NATO cohesion and encouraged greater European defense cooperation, driven by concerns about potential future threats from Russia (Akbar et al., 2023). At the same time, Western economic sanctions against Russia may inflict long-term harm on the Russian economy. However, in the short term, Russia continues to wield influence through its control over energy supplies and critical trade routes (Syahbuddin & Haryati, 2022).

The war prompted Western countries and their allies to impose extensive sanctions on Russia beginning on March 10, 2022. These sanctions targeted Russian oil and gas exports, pressured major companies to exit the Russian market, and restricted financial operations (Kluge, 2024). In retaliation, Russia released a list of unfriendly countries and banned aircraft from 36 states, including 27 members of the European Union, from entering its airspace (Russian News Agency, 2022). In response to the embargo on its energy exports, Russia shifted its oil trade to Turkey, India, and China at discounted prices, which helps explain why Russia continues to endure sanctions despite significant economic disruption (Kluge, 2024).

International sanctions have nonetheless severely impacted Russia's economy. Western powers, including the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Japan, coordinated unprecedented measures that targeted Russia's financial system. One of the most consequential actions was the freezing of approximately \$300 billion in assets belonging to the Central Bank of Russia (Gayatri et al., 2024). This action blocked Russia's access to most of its foreign exchange reserves, making it difficult for the country to stabilize the ruble or finance military operations. Russia's removal from the SWIFT international banking system further limits its ability to conduct financial transactions, deepening its economic isolation. Gayatri, Olivia, and Nizmi observe that removal from SWIFT created a severe liquidity crisis in Russian banks, restricted their access to foreign currency, and undermined the nation's financial stability (Gayatri et al., 2024).

Sanctions also restrict high-technology exports to Russia, including semiconductors and equipment essential to defense industries, thereby slowing the country's technological and military development (Gayatri et al., 2024). After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, many international companies had already withdrawn from Russia due to operational and financial challenges, resulting in declines in trade activity and limiting access to global markets (Mahendra, 2022). In response to continued external pressure, Russia banned various Western imports, including food products, and sought alternative suppliers such as Turkey, China, and Brazil. To adapt to these changes, Russia implemented an import-substitution strategy to reduce its reliance on foreign goods and strengthen domestic production. This policy reflects Russia's efforts to withstand international pressure and cultivate a more self-sufficient economy, even though challenges in attracting foreign investment remain significant (Mahendra, 2022).

In the context of offensive realism, Russia's actions can be seen as logical steps to protect its strategic position in the face of pressure from the West. Russia's accumulation of foreign exchange reserves, pursuit of domestic economic resilience, and redirection of

key trade flows are part of a broader strategy to counterbalance economic restrictions and political isolation. From this perspective, Western sanctions and technological embargoes are efforts to limit Russia's capacity to build its military and economic strength, while Russia's responses aim to secure its survival and reduce its dependence on countries it perceives as potential adversaries.

### **European Gas Dependence on Russia**

After the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that caused an energy crisis in the area, it became clear that Europe is becoming more and more dependent on Russia for energy. Russia's energy infrastructure, like the gas pipeline, has been crucial in creating energy ties between the two sides. Russia is one of the major producers of natural gas, and it has built a massive pipeline system that sends a lot of energy to Europe. But this dependence also means that Europe is very dependent on Russia (Hanifah, 2017).

The European Union's economic sanctions on Russia have made it even harder to discover new sources of energy. Even though there have been efforts to reduce dependence, like bringing in more liquefied natural gas (LNG) and switching to renewable energy through programs like RePowerEU, it is still challenging to ignore how much we rely on Russian gas infrastructure (Hanifah, 2017). Stopping gas from flowing to European countries like Poland and Austria shows how Russian politics can affect the region. Even though steps have already been taken to diversify, the short-term transition has been very challenging because Europe's energy infrastructure is so closely linked to Russian supplies. This reliance is not solely an energy concern; it also affects the political and economic dynamics in the region (Hanifah, 2017).

Along with this, European countries have taken strategic steps to reduce dependence on Russia. Efforts such as increasing LNG imports from other countries allow Europe to diversify energy supply sources and reduce dependence on Russia (As & Idris, 2024).

European countries have also taken strategic steps to lessen their reliance on Russia. As & Idris (2024) say, Europe can obtain its energy from more than one source and rely less on Russia by doing things like bringing in more LNG from other countries. RePowerEU and other programs are working diligently to make the switch to renewable energy. They set high goals for making renewable hydrogen and building clean energy infrastructure. There are also policies in place to save energy that are meant to make different areas, like buildings and transportation, more efficient. The goal is to cut down on the amount of energy used overall. European countries want to make energy security stronger and become energy independent in the long term by using all of these strategies together (As & Idris, 2024).

Russia's energy policy reflects offensive realism, in which Russia acts aggressively to secure its position as a regional hegemon. Europe's energy dependence creates a "structural dependence" that makes it difficult for European countries to take a firm stance against Russia without compromising their energy stability. Europe's energy diversification measures through LNG imports and renewable energy transitions such as RePowerEU are a response to this structural dependency (As & Idris, 2024). However, as

Mearsheimer explains in *Offensive Realism*, such actions cannot completely reduce Russia's influence as long as Europe's energy infrastructure is still integrated with Russia. According to the offensive realism perspective, "great powers" will constantly try to maximize their relative power to survive in an anarchic international system. In this international anarchy, there is no central authority that can guarantee the security of all states, so large states tend to be aggressive, suspicious of other states' intentions, and constantly competing for regional dominance or hegemony. In this framework, Russia's use of gas as a tool of geo-economic pressure is not an anomaly but a realistic strategy to maintain and expand its power in the face of the Western coalition (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Russia has a strategic advantage over European countries because they rely on Russian gas. By controlling the distribution of energy to the European region, Russia creates a significant bargaining position against EU countries that have been part of the NATO alliance and Western foreign policy that tends to be anti-Russian. In the logic of offensive realism, power is not only about military strength but also includes structural power, such as control over vital resources. Russia uses this state of dependency as a political instrument to pressure, divide, and test European cohesion in support of Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Furthermore, offensive realism emphasizes that states care more about relative power than absolute power. A state's success is based on its competitive advantage, not its gains. By making European countries energetically vulnerable, Russia seeks to create an imbalance of power in its favor while inhibiting potential collective resistance to its aggression in Ukraine. Thus, the link between the regional impact of the Russia-Ukraine war, energy dependence, and offensive realism theory lies in how Russia rationally and strategically utilized gas dependence to magnify its relative power in an anarchic international system. Energy dependence becomes an instrument of power, and the conflict reflects the offensive logic of a large state in achieving dominance and ensuring the continuity of its power in the region (Mearsheimer, 2001).

### **Economy in the Russia-Ukraine War**

Mearsheimer (2001) argues that great powers depend on offensive military capabilities that enable them to confront and, when necessary, vanquish their adversaries. Economic strength supports these capabilities because national prosperity enables a state to expand and sustain its military forces. After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, its economic ties with Western states declined, while relations with Turkey, India, and China deepened, particularly through increased oil and gas exports and wider trade flows (Gamio & Swanson, 2022). In this environment, Russia leaned on two central financial pillars to fund its military operations and absorb sanctions: revenue from natural resources and the personal wealth of oligarchs closely connected to the Kremlin (Gamio & Swanson, 2022; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022).

Russia's economic structure depends heavily on oligarchs who control major sectors of the economy, especially natural resource industries such as oil and gas (Guriev & Rachinsky, 2005). Many of these figures belong to the *Siloviki*, a group of elites with backgrounds in security, intelligence, and military institutions who now hold senior

political positions. Over the years, some members of this group have accumulated vast economic influence, becoming what scholars refer to as Silovarchs. Their authority remains central to Russia's economic system and continues to reinforce the Kremlin's war strategy (Aslund, 2019; Taylor, 2017; Treisman, 2007). A significant part of this influence comes from long-term control over key natural resource assets, including state-connected companies such as Gazprom, which has served as a major financial engine for Moscow since the early 2000s (Treisman, 2007).

Many oligarchs and silovarchs have faced sanctions due to their involvement in Russia's aggression, according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury (2022). Sergei Borisovich Ivanov, a long-time associate of President Putin and a former officer of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, serves as a permanent member of the Russian Security Council. His son, Sergeevich Ivanov, leads Alrosa, the state-owned diamond company, and sits on the board of Gazprombank, one of Russia's largest financial institutions (Lozano, 2022). Both faced sanctions due to their institutional support for the invasion.

Another influential figure is Andrey Patrushev, who leads Gazprom Neft, one of Russia's largest producers of oil and gas. He is the son of Platonovich Patrushev, also a former officer of the security services and now Secretary of the Russian Security Council. Igor Ivanovich Sechin represents another key ally of Putin. He serves as the Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of Rosneft, while his son, Ivan Sechin, also holds a senior role within the company. Alexander Vedyakhin, the deputy chairman of Sberbank, and senior leaders at VTB Bank, such as Andrey Puchkov and Yuriy Soloviev, are also on the list of people who have been sanctioned (Lozano, 2022; Treisman, 2007; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022).

The wealth generated from oil, gas, and other natural resources remains under the control of oligarchs linked to the Siloviki network. This elite circle forms the core of Putin's political authority and provides the financial resources that sustain Russia's war economy and its long-term military operations in Ukraine. Sanctions from the United States and Western states seek to weaken this financial system and limit Russia's ability to maintain or expand its military power (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). Even so, the coordinated management of natural resource revenues by oligarchs and the Siloviki continues to direct substantial funds toward Russia's defense sector.

As Yergin & Gustafson (1994) in Aslund (2019) state, this centralized system allows Moscow to mobilize state-owned and oligarch-controlled assets to pursue strategic objectives. Consequently, Russia continues to increase its defense budget despite its international isolation. In 2023, Russia allocated 109.45 billion United States dollars to its military, the highest level recorded since 1993 (Statista, 2024).

### **Wagner Coup and Political Dynamics During the Russian War**

In carrying out its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has actively utilized Private Military Companies (PMCs), especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. One of the most well-known PMCs is the Wagner Group, founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch known to be close to the Kremlin (Nurhaliza & Burhanuddin, 2023). Among the oligarchs

in Putin's circle of power, Yevgeny Prigozhin is a Russian businessman known for his close ties to President Vladimir Putin through his involvement in several state-connected businesses. He is nicknamed "Putin's Chef" (Gurbanov, 2023).

The Wagner Group is spread across various parts of the world to support Russia's national interests, including Syria, Libya, Venezuela, and several regions of Africa (Nurhaliza & Burhanuddin, 2023). Although the Russian government does not acknowledge the involvement or existence of the Wagner Group, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reports that Russia's Main Directorate of Intelligence (GRU) oversees the Wagner Group, provides training at a military base in southern Russia, and sends Wagner Group personnel to Syria before Russia intervenes in Crimea (Nurhaliza & Burhanuddin, 2023).

However, on June 24, 2023, the Wagner Group, a Russian-origin mercenary group led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, launched a coup d'état by seizing control of the Russian military command center in Rostov-on-Don. This action is the culmination of tensions that have been growing for several months between Wagner and the Russian Defense Ministry, especially with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov (Sorongan, 2023). This dispute intensified after Prigozhin accused Shoigu of failing to provide adequate logistical support to his troops during the war in Ukraine (Sorongan, 2023). Tensions escalated as Prigozhin alleged that Shoigu had ordered a rocket attack on the Wagner camp, which led to the deaths of several of their soldiers (Sorongan, 2023).

One day earlier, on June 23, 2023, Prigozhin released a video that further clarified his feud with Russian military leaders. He even questioned President Vladimir Putin's reasons for invading Ukraine and accused the Russian military leadership of committing "crimes" that must be stopped. With the support of some of his troops, Prigozhin announced a "march for justice" towards Moscow (Sorongan, 2023). After occupying the city of Rostov-on-Don, Prigozhin claimed that the Wagner Group had taken over the city's military headquarters without significant resistance. However, President Putin responded firmly, calling Prigozhin's actions a "betrayal" and a "stab in the back." Putin promised to crack down on this armed insurgency and even deployed military helicopters to attack the Wagner convoy moving towards Moscow. The government's strong response shows that the threat posed by Wagner is considered serious and poses a significant risk to Russia's stability (BBC News Indonesia, 2023).

On June 25, the Wagner coup ended abruptly after Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko became a mediator in the negotiations. Under the agreement, Prigozhin agreed to end the rebellion and go into exile in Belarus (BBC News Indonesia 2023). In return, the Russian government closed the criminal case against Prigozhin. Although this agreement prevented the conflict from spreading, Alexander Lukashenko's intervention, considered a small ally of Putin, remains embarrassing for the Russian government and shows Putin's weakness in dealing with internal threats, especially amid a war (BBC News Indonesia, 2023).

## **CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS**

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 because it saw Ukraine joining NATO as a military threat to its territory and citizens. Russia saw this as a way to protect itself as a Great Power. According to this theory, in an anarchic international system, great powers operate out of fear, rely on self-help, and strive to maximize power to protect their position against rivals. From this perspective, Putin views the invasion as a way to prevent Ukraine from strengthening its military and political standing through NATO, which he believes could eventually be used against Russia. Putin's confidence rests on long-standing support from the coalition of oligarchs and the Siloviki, often referred to as the Silovarch network, whose economic resources and political influence have sustained his authority for decades. Their control over the energy sector and other strategic industries continues to enhance Russia's military capacity and enables Putin to pursue offensive political goals against Ukraine. However, internal tensions complicate this picture. The Wagner Group uprising in June 2023 revealed frustration among private military actors regarding Putin's leadership and the broader war strategy. However, negotiations halted the rebellion, and the incident exposed cracks within the elite coalition that once firmly supported the Kremlin. In line with the logic of offensive realism, sustainable peace requires that Russia and Ukraine recognize each other's core interests and that decisions be shaped by mutual consent rather than coercion or unilateral action. Without such acknowledgement, both sides will continue to see insecurity and mistrust as justification for further escalation, making long-term stability increasingly difficult.

The findings from the offensive realism analysis of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine urge international policymakers to examine how major powers make strategic decisions when they view geopolitical policies as threats, ensuring that their actions do not unintentionally escalate into threats against other states. This research allows researchers and future studies to adopt a different perspective, viewing invasive actions not only as territorial expansion but also as a choice made in self-defense to eliminate anticipated threats. However, this study also faces limitations in the data concerning the extent to which NATO countries have positioned their military infrastructure near Russia's borders, which Vladimir Putin claims is the primary factor behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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