

## *War in Ukraine: The Clash of Norms and Ontologies<sup>1</sup>*

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In his survey of Europe's twentieth-century history, Mark Mazower described the enduring conflicts that plagued the “dark continent” as civil wars.<sup>2</sup> Underlying the assumption of internecine conflict is the view that Europe shares a civilizational commonality that only requires adequate political expression for the logic of conflict to be overcome. After the end of the Cold War in 1989, it was assumed that finally a formula had been found to give institutional form to that unity. The 1975 *Helsinki Final Act* had already united the continent in its declared commitment to sovereign equality and respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty, refraining from the threat or use of force, the inviolability of frontiers, the territorial integrity of states, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and non-intervention in internal affairs.<sup>3</sup> The peace settlement after 1989 drew on these norms. The 1990 *Charter of Paris for a New Europe* heralded “a

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Helsinki Final Act*. Helsinki, 1 August 1975. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501.pdf>.

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new era of democracy, peace and unity," stressing that "Europe is liberating itself from its past."<sup>4</sup> The 2010 OSCE *Astana Declaration* laid out a "vision of a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok, rooted in agreed principles, shared commitments and common goals."<sup>5</sup>

What went wrong? Why did Europe and the West more broadly plunge into renewed conflict with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022? The conflict exposed the underlying tension between two normative principles enshrined in the post-1989 settlement - the free and sovereign right of states to choose their own security alignments, and the idea of indivisible security, the view that the security of one state should not be at the expense of another. The former was promoted by the West and formed an important justification for NATO enlargement, while the latter was stressed more by Russia, and used to justify its opposition to NATO enlargement and its ultimate decision to go to war. Both principles were consistent with the larger overarching normative framework of the post-1945 UN Charter international system. Yet, in the context of European security, they proved to be contradictory and ultimately undermined the two sides' ability to peacefully co-exist.

If we dig deeper, these contradictions and the two sides' inability to find a way to reconcile them reveal a profound ontological divide between contrasting understandings of reality in international politics and the meanings of such fundamental concepts as sovereignty and security. One, embraced by the Russian side, sees interstate relations as an arena of perpetual struggle, where certain tried and tested rules of co-existence (sovereignty, non-interference, and balance of power) must be followed in order to keep this struggle from descending into unbridled conflict and chaos. The other, embraced by the West, stresses the transformative role of liberalism and democracy in taming interstate competition. The expansion of the liberal community of states and their continued hegemony over world politics are considered necessary for the preservation of global peace and stability. These contrasting and

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<sup>4</sup> Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, Paris, 21 November 1990, <https://www.oscepa.org/documents/all-documents/documents-1/historical-documents-1/673-1990-charter-of-paris-for-a-new-europe/file>.

<sup>5</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Astana Commemorative Declaration: Towards a Security Community*, Astana, 3 December 2010. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/6/74985.pdf>.

conflicting ontologies shaped how each side understood and operationalized the contending principles of *freedom of choice* versus *indivisibility of security*, ultimately provoking an acrimonious and irreconcilable debate over NATO enlargement that led to war on 24 February.

An ontological approach helps explain the dynamics of the conflict. More is at stake than the future of Ukraine or of security in Europe, but the two sides' understanding of social reality and how the world works. This explains why in trying to reach agreement to avoid conflict and how to end it, the two talk past one another, almost as if they are living in separate realities, which, in a sense, they are. This short paper is not intended as an exhaustive empirical or conceptual study of the conflict's ontological dimensions. Instead, our intention is to open up new debates and pathways of research into the origins and character of the current conflict. It should be stressed that explaining the motives and thinking that led to this war in no way justifies Russia's decision to invade Ukraine or condones the violence and brutality that have followed. However, understanding how the clash of ontologies produced this conflict is necessary both to end it and to avoid future conflicts and wars.

### **A Conflict of Ontologies**

The current conflict draws attention to different interpretations of the post-Cold War normative system. It also reveals two separate sets of reality, based not on easily understandable classical ideological categories (as was the case with the Cold War struggle between capitalism and socialism) or the current framing of the conflict as one between democracy and autocracy. The dispute runs deeper and can be best understood as an ontological conflict, in the philosophical sense that ontology "refers to the claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social [or, by extension, political] inquiry makes about the nature of social [or political] reality—claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with one another."<sup>6</sup> Diverging Russian versus Western cultural and civilizational identities certainly play their part in shaping the ontological struggle, but at its root are different

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<sup>6</sup> Nathan Blaikie, *Approaches to Social Enquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 5.

representations of the mechanics of international politics and representations of global order.<sup>7</sup>

A rich literature on ontological security has developed over the last two decades. Ontological security in politics and international relations focuses on security-as-being rather than the traditional model of security-as-survival.<sup>8</sup> This primarily focuses on individuals' and states' need to establish a stable sense of identity and self-understanding that is recognized by others and which is a prerequisite for agency and meaningful social action.<sup>9</sup> Several studies have explored the troubled dynamic of Russia-Western relations through this lens, helping us understand the ways in which both sides need to establish a secure sense of identity that has generated and shaped the current conflict.<sup>10</sup> Studies that take a longer historical perspective stress the enduring ontological ambivalence about Russia's membership in European international society.<sup>11</sup>

Browning and Joennemi argue that the ontological security literature has been overly focused on the question of identity: "ontological security is not a question of identity *per se*, but rather of an actor's capacity to cope with uncertainty and change.....emphasizing one identity over claims to specific identities are simply one mechanism by which actors may seek to locate themselves and routinize their relationships with the world."<sup>12</sup> Drawing on this insight, we depart from the established literature and focus less on ontological issues related to identity and more on how the two sides understand the very nature of world politics itself. Our purpose is not to dismiss the importance of identity and the critical role it plays in shaping social action. We acknowledge that the differences in the ways the two sides understand the

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<sup>7</sup> Trine Flockhart, "The Coming Multi-Order World," *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, 1 (2016): pp. 3-30.

<sup>8</sup> Jef Huysmans, "Security! What do you Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier," *European Journal of International Relations* 4, 2 (1998): pp. 226-63; Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, 3 (2006): pp. 341-370; Brent Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics."

<sup>10</sup> Viktoria Akchurina, and Vincent Della Sala, "Russia, Europe and the Ontological Security Dilemma: Narrating the Emerging Eurasian Space," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, 10 (2018): pp. 1638-1655.

<sup>11</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, "Ontological Security, Self-articulation and the Securitization of Identity," *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 1 (2017): pp. 31-47: 35.

mechanics of world politics can ultimately be traced to their identity concerns. However, for the purposes of this paper, we put identity to the side in order to direct our attention to the ways that the two sides' different understandings of international politics generate and sustain the current conflict.

We begin with the premise that just as states and individuals have a need to establish stable identities and a sense of self, they also need to establish cognitive consistency about *the way the world works* to avoid the anxiety and fear that comes with the uncertainty and unpredictability that continually confronts them in international politics. In this sense, Russia and the West have developed conflicting ontologies about the nature of social and political order (particularly about international security), rendering genuine dialogue very difficult and making it easy to attribute the worst motives to the other side

The ontological conflict we examine in this paper is between liberal hegemony on the one hand, as promoted by the West and its allies, and sovereign internationalism, as promoted by Russia. This is a more profound conflict than one between geopolitical interests or ideologies (such as democracy versus autocracy). It is rooted in different understandings of the social reality of international relations and the meaning of security, modernity, and the social compact between states. It is accompanied on the one side by a critique of liberal/universalist visions of modernity and on the other by the condemnation of coercive methods of political integration. This fundamental division generates and sustains the current conflict. It nurtured distrust that grew into outright hostility, reproducing traditional Manicheism to a degree that even surpasses the original Cold War.

Of course, these ontologies are not fully accepted by all the major political actors or intellectual thinkers in Russia or the West. Many Western realists reject the ontological tenets of liberal hegemony and have long opposed NATO enlargement.<sup>13</sup> More liberal-minded Russian scholars question the ontological assumptions that underlie Russia's conception of sovereign internationalism.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the

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<sup>13</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Steven. M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Viktor Kremenyuk, "Nasiliye i Nenasiliye v 'Imperiyi Mirovoi Demokratii'," *Mezhdunarodnyye*

ontologies outlined below are representative of the mainstream and official discourses that shape the policies of both sides and that has led to the current conflict.

The ontological foundations of liberal hegemony are based on ideas about liberal and democratic peace. According to these ideas, states can transcend security competition by practicing liberal politics and economics and joining institutions that commit them to predictable patterns of behavior in their relations with one another.<sup>15</sup> While relations between liberal democracies tend to be *naturally* cooperative and peaceful, they must still operate in a larger international system where they co-exist with autocracies and illiberal states. In this potentially perilous environment, liberal states seek a congenial international environment, as a sort of ecosystem (a liberal order) that creates the condition for the safety and wellbeing of liberal democracy.<sup>16</sup> Hegemonic power is necessary to build and maintain this ecosystem and its constituent institutions.<sup>17</sup> However, this hegemony is consensual. The hegemon's arbitrary and indiscriminate exercise of power is reined in – at least to a tolerable degree – by the same liberal rules and institutions that the hegemon fosters and maintains.<sup>18</sup>

Security is reconceptualized beyond the survival and sovereignty of the state also to include human security, i.e. the protection of human rights (including democratic rights) of individuals inside states.<sup>19</sup> The two are seen as inextricably linked, as states that violate the rights of their citizens are also those that act aggressively outside their borders and threaten other states.<sup>20</sup> Enlarging the liberal and democratic community of states thus increases security, both at the individual and state levels. It is thus of critical importance that all states retain the freedom to join liberal and democratic associations

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*Protsessy* 1, 2004; Andrei Kortunov, "Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity," *Russian International Affairs Council*, 4 September, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/between-polycentrism-and-bipolarity/>

<sup>15</sup> Michael W. Doyle, *Liberal Peace: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," *Review of International Studies* 25, 2 (1999): pp. 179-196.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph P. Nye, "Redefining the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 78, 4 (1999): pp. 22-35.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Marie Slaughter, "Intervention, Libya, and the Future of Sovereignty," *The Atlantic*, 4 September 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/09/intervention-libya-and-the-futureof-sovereignty/244537/>.

(such as NATO) if they meet the normative qualifications for membership. According to NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg, "The enlargement of NATO over several decades has been a great success, helped to spread democracy, the rule of law, stability, peace across Europe, and it is for the applicant country, the country aspiring for membership, and for the 30 allies, to decide on membership."<sup>21</sup>

Operating on the basis of these assumptions, an alliance of liberal democratic states such as NATO cannot be a threat to other states. This was one of the foundational principles of NATO enlargement going back to German reunification and one that Mikhail Gorbachev (tentatively) accepted in 1990 when he agreed that a united Germany within NATO was a better proposition for the Soviet Union than one outside it.<sup>22</sup> Its enlargement to include as many states as possible in the democratic community is actually beneficial to the states that remain on the outside. They, too, benefit from the peaceful norms and conflict-suppressing potential of the alliance.<sup>23</sup> According to former NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "thanks to the EU and NATO, the stability on its Western borders that Russia has sought for centuries has now been achieved. Russia should be celebrating."<sup>24</sup>

The US and its Western allies do not comprehend why Russia regards NATO enlargement as a threat. In a telephone discussion during the 2014 Ukraine crisis with US President Barack Obama, Angela Merkel questioned whether Putin "had lost his grip on reality" and was "living in another world."<sup>25</sup> The expanding liberal peace order is generous to its epigones, so why is Moscow not ready to accept its strictures and subordinations when the benefits of doing so are so great?

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<sup>21</sup> Jens Stoltenberg, "Doorstep Statement," *NATO*, 7 April 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_194326.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_194326.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Mary Elise Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> John. G. Ruggie, "Consolidating the European Pillar: The Key to NATO's Future," *Washington Quarterly* 20, 1 (1997): pp. 109-124.

<sup>24</sup> Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "The Kremlin's Tragic Miscalculation," *Project Syndicate*, 3 November 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-benefited-from-nato-enlargement-by-anders-fogh-rasmussen-2015-11>.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Baker, "Pressure Rising as Obama Works to Rein in Russia," *New York Times*, 3 March 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/03/world/europe/pressure-rising-as-obama-works-to-rein-in-russia.html>.

Moscow's opposition to NATO enlargement and liberal hegemony reveals its revanchist and imperialist intentions and deeper ideological hostility to liberal democracy. According to Person and McFaul, "[Putin] has already blocked NATO expansion for all intents and purposes, thereby revealing that he wants something far more significant in Ukraine today: the end of democracy and the return of subjugation."<sup>26</sup>

On the other side, Russia's ontology of *sovereign internationalism* rests on ideas that would be familiar to students of the English School, particularly the traditional conception of *international society* of its pioneering theorists Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. States avert the descent into a Hobbesian state of *war of all against all* by forming social relations based on fundamental norms, principles, and institutions. These include respect for sovereignty and non-interference (at least when it comes to other great powers), some measure of restraint in their pursuit of power and security (with the goal of maintaining the balance of power rather than pursuing its preponderance), and great powers assuming responsibility for cooperative management of the system.<sup>27</sup>

Russia's contemporary version of sovereign internationalism modifies these ideas. Sovereignty and non-interference guarantee each state's right to pursue its own path even if it diverges from liberalism and democracy. Russian leaders consistently defend the right of each state "to choose those models of development which correspond to their national, cultural and confessional identities."<sup>28</sup> Great power management is preserved through the UN Security Council and great powers, such as Russia, retain the right to maintain a "sphere of privileged interests," although they are (at least formally) restricted from pursuing this right through coercive means that openly violate other states' sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> Balance of power is no longer practiced in the *realpolitik* style of Castlereagh or Bismarck. But its core element, restraint in the pursuit

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Person and Michael McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most," *Journal of Democracy* 33, 2 (2022): pp. 18-27.

<sup>27</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford: University Press, 1977).

<sup>28</sup> Sergei Lavrov, "Address to the UN General Assembly," *Russian Council on International Affairs*, 1 October 2018, [https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/ministr-inostrannykh-del-vystupil-na-generalnoy-assamblee-oon/?sphrase\\_id=31559967](https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/ministr-inostrannykh-del-vystupil-na-generalnoy-assamblee-oon/?sphrase_id=31559967).

<sup>29</sup> Dmitri Medvedev, "Interview by Russian TV Channels (Channel One, Rossia, and NTV)," 31 August 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48301>.



of power, is still central and is now articulated as the principle of "indivisibility of security."

From this perspective, the project of liberal hegemony not only threatens Russia's security and sovereignty but also erodes the very foundations of order and civilized relations between states.<sup>30</sup> Efforts by liberal states to expand the zone of liberal peace encroach on state sovereignty and the right of every nation to determine its own course of development. As demonstrated by Western interventions in Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the expansion of the putative zone of liberal and democratic peace is particularly dangerous in a world of cultural and civilizational diversity, setting the stage for intense conflict between societies over their most deeply held values.<sup>31</sup> NATO enlargement eschews restraint and instead pursues preponderance, upsetting the balance of power and violating the foundational principle of the "indivisibility of security."<sup>32</sup> US unilateralism in pursuit of liberal hegemony undermines the system of responsible great power management, which requires consensus and compromise that takes the view and interests of all the great powers into account.<sup>33</sup> "Unilateral and frequently illegitimate actions have not resolved any problems but have caused new human tragedies and created new centers of tension."<sup>34</sup> The veteran war correspondent Alexander Sladkov believes that Russia is locked in an existential struggle with the entire West, and not just with the regime in Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> According to Sergei Karaganov, "There is only one possible solution in the increasingly unstable and dangerous renationalizing world – a new conservative, but forward-looking, 'concert of nations'."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Russian President Vladimir Putin's Speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy," 10 February 2007, <http://president.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/02/118109.shtml>.

<sup>31</sup> Alexei Arbatov, "Krusheniye Miroporyadka," *Rossiya v Globalnoi Politike*, 6 December 2017, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/krushenie-miroporyadka-2/>.

<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Putin, "News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks," 1 February 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67690>.

<sup>33</sup> Sergei Karaganov, "A Predictable Future?" *Russia in Global Affairs* 17, 2 (2019): pp. 60-74, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-predictable-future/>.

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Speech at the 2007 Munich Conference."

<sup>35</sup> Fred Weir, "For Russian Public, How Full a View of the War do Front-Line Reporters Give?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 June 2022, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2022/0623/For-Russian-public-how-full-a-view-of-war-do-front-line-reporters-give>.

<sup>36</sup> Sergei Karaganov, "2016 – Pobeda Konservativnogo Realizma," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 3 January 2017, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/2016-pobeda-konservativnogo-realizma/>.

Neither side lives up to the proclaimed standards and norms of either ontology. In too many instances, the US has not accepted restraints on its hegemony, instead pursuing selfish power maximization. It invaded Iraq and pushed for NATO enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine, overriding the objections of its closest liberal allies. It stays out of key liberal institutions and agreements that it purportedly upholds and criticizes others for violating, such as the International Criminal Court and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. For its part, Russia routinely violates the principles of "sovereign internationalism." It advocates *indivisibility of security* in its relations with the West while failing to apply the same principle in relations with the Soviet successor states. It acts more like an overbearing neighborhood bully than a responsible regional hegemon, routinely using coercive measures that violate other states' sovereignty to pursue its *sphere of privileged interests*. The invasion of Ukraine is just the latest in a series of such policies, which include annexing Crimea, sponsoring separatism in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as more covert interventions in these countries' internal affairs. The expansive definition of security has had a profoundly deleterious effect on Russian democratic development, encouraging "emergency" forms of rule to predominate over impartial constitutional procedures.<sup>37</sup> The hypocritical and inconsistent ways in which both apply their stated principles and standards confirm mutual suspicions about the other side's malevolent intentions, fueling the current conflict and making their ontological positions even more irreconcilable.

### **The (Ontological) Road to War**

These fundamental ontological differences are reflected in the tension between *freedom of choice* and *indivisibility of security*, which ultimately led to the unravelling of the post-1989 settlement. Russia repeatedly pointed out the tension in the run-up to its invasion of Ukraine, although insisted that it was a contradiction, and thus susceptible to negotiated resolution, rather than an antinomy, which is irreconcilable. Russian leaders from Mikhail Gorbachev through to Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin opposed unmediated NATO enlargement – that is, expansion without some sort of overarching security framework that included Russia – by appealing to this principle of

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<sup>37</sup> Jef Huysmans, *Unbound: Enacting Democratic Limits* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

indivisibility. Even such a passionate advocate of enlargement as Zbigniew Brzezinski feared the consequences of dividing European security, contrary to the promises of "indivisibility," and argued that Moscow should be offered a special cooperative relationship that would "create a new transcontinental system of collective security, that goes beyond the expansion of NATO proper."<sup>38</sup> Even Brzezinski sought to resolve the contradiction rather than allowing it to fester and become a perceived antinomy. In the event, Russia viewed the promise of NATO membership for Ukraine granted at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008 as an "existential threat."<sup>39</sup>

Andrei Sushentsov and William Wohlforth argue that "NATO centrality" that excludes Russia, rather than enlargement per se, is the root cause of conflict.<sup>40</sup> A more inclusive, concert-style arrangement would have avoided Moscow's growing sense of betrayal, fueled by its (not entirely unfounded) belief that, in 1990, the West had promised not to enlarge NATO by "even one inch" to the East.<sup>41</sup> NATO enlargement would be mediated by some sort of robust and inclusive pan-continental framework that could finally live up to the principle of indivisibility. However, the rapid pace of events and the fact that the US and the Federal Republic of Germany favored NATO centrality, while the collapsing Soviet Union was too weak to resolutely back an inclusive alternative model, "pulled the legs from under proponents of alternative visions."<sup>42</sup>

To be sure, some efforts to include Russia were put in place. The 1997 *NATO-Russia Founding Act* declared that the two sides no longer considered each other *as adversaries* and committed them to *strengthening mutual trust and cooperation*. Consultative institutions, such as the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) and its successor, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), were created to give Russia a formal

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<sup>38</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), p. 101.

<sup>39</sup> John Mearsheimer, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis," *The National Interest*, 23 June 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/causes-and-consequences-ukraine-crisis-203182>.

<sup>40</sup> Andrei Sushentsov and William Wohlforth, "The Tragedy of US–Russian Relations: NATO Centrality and the Revisionists' Spiral," *International Politics* 57, 3 (2020): pp. 427-450.

<sup>41</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard," *National Security Archive*, George Washington University, 12 December 2017, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>.

<sup>42</sup> Sushentsov and Wohlforth, "The Tragedy of US–Russian Relations," p. 431.

role within the alliance. However, these measures only gave Russia "the symbolic pomp of equality," but no real say in the system.<sup>43</sup> NATO refused to engage with Russia on important issues such as NATO enlargement. NATO members were careful to establish a unified position before consulting with Russia, presenting Moscow with a *fait accompli* before any meaningful consultations could take place in the PJC or NRC.<sup>44</sup>

Simply put, there appeared to be "no place for Russia" or its ontological point of view in the Western-dominated security order.<sup>45</sup> The addition of new members, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, which had been victims of Soviet/Russian aggression, created a strong constituency within the alliance to continue NATO's open-door policy. George W. Bush's *big bang* enlargement in 2004 extended the alliance to the Baltic States and most of the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, bringing NATO to Russia's door. All serious decisions about NATO enlargement were taken in Washington. Even Germany's and France's efforts to block Ukraine and Georgia's membership at the April 2008 Bucharest summit failed to permanently remove their membership from the agenda. Despite these setbacks, Russia held firm in its own ontological position, making several efforts to revive the principle of *indivisibility of security*, such as Dmitry Medvedev's 2008-09 proposals for a new *Security Treaty for Europe*, Russia's proposal to establish a joint Russia-NATO missile defense system, and offers to establish formal relations between NATO and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. NATO countries, secure in their ontology, rebuffed these efforts, insisting that the fundamental questions of European security were settled and that there was simply nothing to talk about.<sup>46</sup> The contradiction gained an existential dimension and was thereby constructed as an antimony. The gulf between interpretations of post-Cold War order became a matter of ontological concern.

By the time of his fourth term in the presidency from 2018, it was clear that Putin had decided to resolve the contradiction one way or another. Against the background of

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<sup>43</sup> Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 184.

<sup>44</sup> Andrej Krickovic, "When Ties Do Not Bind: the Failure of Institutional Binding in NATO Russia Relations," *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, 2 (2016): pp. 175-199.

<sup>45</sup> William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Russian military deployments adjacent to Ukraine, on 17 December 2021 Moscow submitted two draft European security treaties, one addressed to the US and the other to NATO. The documents contained three key demands: no further NATO enlargement, covering in the first instance Ukraine and Georgia; no deployment of weaponry or military forces on Russia's borders; and NATO's return to the force posture of May 1997, when the NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed. The demarche forced a substantive US-Russian dialogue on European security. For the first time since the 1990s, Russia's security concerns were being discussed at the highest diplomatic levels, and this represented a major Russian achievement. The US response on 26 January offered limited concessions – arms control for medium-range missiles, confidence-building, transparency, and verification measures along the NATO-Russia borderlands. The door to continued diplomacy was kept ajar, if not open.

It was more than the West had been willing to offer for a generation, as European security was again on the agenda. However, frantic diplomacy belied the lack of serious engagement and only demonstrated the continued gulf between both sides. Conflicting ontologies prevented rational statecraft and the diplomatic resolution of the conflict. The paradox of an antinomy is that the positions of both sides were in themselves reasonable, but the accretion of years of distrust and even hostility had effectively closed the window of opportunity for a negotiated settlement. Neither side's ontological views about the ways in which the *world worked* gave them much latitude for compromise on fundamental principles. The US rejected Russia's demand for written guarantees limiting NATO enlargement outright and continued to insist on the right of sovereign states to choose their security arrangements.<sup>47</sup> American negotiators refused to discuss the issue of Ukraine's NATO membership, treating it as a "non-issue" during talks with Russia.<sup>48</sup>

This was met with bitter disappointment in Moscow. The US promised to continue dialogue if Russia *de-escalated* its forces on Ukraine's border. But Moscow saw Washington's conditional offer of negotiation as just another opportunity for the US and

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<sup>47</sup> Jens Stoltenberg, "Press Conference," NATO, 26 January 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_191254.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_191254.htm).

<sup>48</sup> Ben Armbruster, "Biden Official Admits US Refused to Address Ukraine and NATO Before Russian Invasion," *Responsible Statecraft*, 14 April 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/04/14/biden-official-admits-us-refused-to-address-ukraine-and-nato-before-russian-invasion/>.

West to continue to equivocate, as NATO enlarged its military presence in Ukraine at the expense of Russia's security. On 1 February, Putin asserted that the NATO response "ignored Russia's fundamental security concerns," adding for good measure that "the United States is not so much concerned about the security of Ukraine, but its main task is to contain Russia's development."<sup>49</sup> Coercive diplomacy was in danger of spinning out of control.

Russia would be satisfied with nothing less than immediate legally binding guarantees. These were not forthcoming as they would not only violate the West's own normative and ontological commitments but would also be seen as appeasing Putin's "aggression."<sup>50</sup> Putin decided to force the issue and invaded Ukraine on 24 February. One could argue that Putin was determined to apply what he called "military-technical" means and that he was just using negotiations to stall for time or establish a *casus belli*.<sup>51</sup> However, credible US intelligence sources indicate that Putin only made a final decision shortly before the invasion began, and the haphazard and uncoordinated nature of the early stages of the campaign corroborates this claim.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Global South Speaks**

As Europe again became locked in an internecine ontological struggle, the rest of the world looked on with alarm. The West's normative concerns about the implications of the invasion for the Charter system is shared by much of the *Global South*. A total of 131 states voted for the 2 March 2022 UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution that condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanded a full withdrawal of Russian forces and a reversal of its decision to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk, with only 5 voting against, and 35 abstaining. China and India abstained from the UNGA vote and avoided openly condemning Russia. China and Russia have

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<sup>49</sup> Vladimir Putin, "News Conference Following Russian-Hungarian Talks."

<sup>50</sup> Ian Bond, "The West Knows the Cost of Appeasement. We Can't Rule Out Any Option for Stopping Putin," *Guardian*, 22 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/22/west-appeasement-putin-russia-ukraine>.

<sup>51</sup> Person and McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most."

<sup>52</sup> James Risen, "US Intelligence Says Putin Made a Last-Minute Decision to Invade Ukraine," *The Intercept*, 11 March 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/03/11/russia-putin-ukraine-invasion-us-intelligence/>.

developed a close strategic partnership that helps them balance against what they see as containment by the US. India depends on Russia as a counterweight to China in Asia and is dependent on Russian arms and energy imports. Nevertheless, Beijing and Delhi have stressed the need to respect the territorial sovereignty and integrity of all nations, including Ukraine. Neither has recognized Donetsk and Lugansk's independence and subsequent annexation by Russia, nor Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea.<sup>53</sup> In a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the September 2022 SCO summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly criticized Russia's invasion, telling Putin that "today's era is not an era of war" and urging him to pursue peace.<sup>54</sup>

Chinese diplomats and official state media echo Russia's concerns about NATO enlargement and vehemently condemn anti-Russian sanctions. Chinese President Xi Jinping has vowed that China will not waver in its support for Moscow's core "sovereignty and security" interests and reaffirmed his commitment to continue to develop the "no limits" Sino-Russian partnership.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, China has refrained from providing Russia with direct material aid for its war effort. To be sure, China has been eager to snap up Russian energy at discounted prices. In May 2022, Russian oil exports to China increased 55 percent year on year, and Russia has now overtaken Saudi Arabia as China's biggest oil supplier.<sup>56</sup> However, Beijing remains cautious about expanding its investments in Russia, fearful of secondary sanctions that may jeopardize its more lucrative economic ties with the West.<sup>57</sup> Major Chinese firms, such as Sinopec, Huawei, and Union Pay have put their plans for expansion in Russia on hold and scaled

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<sup>53</sup> Raj Kumar Sharma, "India's Diplomatic Stand on Russia-Ukraine Crisis," *Valdai Discussion Club*, 25 March 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/india-s-diplomatic-stand-on-russia-ukraine-crisis/>; Yu Bin, "China's Neutrality in a Grave New World," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 11 April 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/chinas-neutrality/>.

<sup>54</sup> Reuters, "Indian PM Modi tells Russia's Putin Now is Not an Era of War," *Reuters*, 16 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/indian-pm-modi-tells-russias-putin-now-is-not-an-era-war-2022-09-16/>.

<sup>55</sup> AFP, "Putin, Xi Hail 'Great Power' Ties at Talks Defying West," p. 16. September 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/16/putin-xi-hail-greatpower-ties-at-talks-defying-west-a78803>.

<sup>56</sup> AFP, "Sanctioned Russia Becomes China's Main Source of Oil, Customs Data Show," *VOA News*, 23 June 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/sanctioned-russia-becomes-china-s-main-source-of-oil-customs-data-show-6630543.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Nathaniel Sher, "Why isn't China Going All Out to Help Russia in Ukraine?" *Responsible Statecraft*, 4 April 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/04/04/why-isnt-china-going-all-out-to-help-russia-in-ukraine/>

back their operations. The Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the financial cornerstone of China's Belt-Road Initiative, has suspended its activities in Russia.<sup>58</sup> While Chinese state media endorses the Russian narrative on Ukraine, influential voices caution against becoming too closely tied to a country whose future is so uncertain. The former editor of the nationalist-leaning *Global Times* newspaper, Hu Xijin, argued that China should not "Russify" its foreign policy by emulating Moscow's truculence and should instead act moderately, through diplomacy and economic engagement.<sup>59</sup>

Russian leaders have tried to appeal to the anti-imperialist sentiments of the Global South, positioning Russia as the leader of a new global movement against Western neo-colonialism.<sup>60</sup> Yet Russia's aggressive and imperialistic behaviour in Ukraine makes this rhetoric ring hollow. A majority of countries from the Global South supported the UN General Assembly resolution rejecting Russia's annexation of the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine and demanding that it immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine's territory. Representatives from Guatemala, Ecuador, Ghana, Liberia, and Cambodia (which cosponsored the resolution) took the stage to condemn Russia's actions in the strongest terms, saying that they were "a flagrant violation of the UN Charter and international law" and "a grave threat to global peace and stability."<sup>61</sup>

While the *global majority* sees Russia's invasion as a threat to the fundamental principles that underwrite the Charter order, this does not mean that they completely absolve the West of blame for the conflict or that they are ready to cede the moral high ground to it. Top leaders from the *Global South*, including South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, and Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar have all publicly stated that NATO enlargement is a

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<sup>58</sup> John Feng, "Five Chinese Companies Have Suspended Business in Russia," *Newsweek*, 27 April 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-business-russia-ukraine-war-sanctions-1701341>.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander Lukin, "Why China Won't Break With Russia Over Ukraine," *The National Interest*, 28 March 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-china-won%E2%80%99t-break-russia-over-ukraine-201495>.

<sup>60</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Plenary Speech at the 19<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club," 27 October 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

<sup>61</sup> United Nations, "With 143 Votes in Favour, 5 Against, General Assembly Adopts Resolution Condemning Russian Federation's Annexation of Four Eastern Ukraine Regions," 12 October 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12458.doc.htm>



root cause of the crisis.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, they remember the death and destruction wrought by recent US and Western military interventions in non-Western nations. From their perspective, Western outrage over Russia's invasion of Ukraine (a white European nation) is hypocritical and exposes Western racism, when compared to the West's muted reactions to Western wars of aggression where non-whites have been the main victims.<sup>63</sup> Jaishankar rejected accusations that India was *sitting on the fence*, and presented a robust defence of his country's sovereign, non-aligned and independent stance. He argued, "You know Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems."<sup>64</sup>

Non-Western leaders are also concerned about the collateral damage that Western sanctions against Russia will cause to the global economy and world order. Few outside the Western core states support the sanctions regime, and even US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Israel and Mexico resisted Washington's pressure to adopt punitive restrictions. These sanctions were unprecedented and included the freeze of over half of the \$630 billion in reserves that Russia held in foreign banks. Non-Western leaders were concerned that these measures set a precedent that fundamentally undermined trust in the impartiality of the rules of international political economy and globalisation in general. They feared that the West's "weaponization" of the global economic system could one day be used against them.<sup>65</sup> They were also troubled by the growing atmosphere of hatred and xenophobia, as sanctions were expanded beyond the Russian government and economy to include Russian educational and cultural institutions and figures. While acknowledging Ukraine's "legitimate struggle" against Russia, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the anti-Russian "witch-

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<sup>62</sup> Gideon Rachman, "Putin, Ukraine and the Revival of the West," *Financial Times*, 15 April 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/7d9f69b9-2f04-451a-a0d5-e1242a2bcb99>.

<sup>63</sup> Colum Lynch, "The West Is With Ukraine: The Rest, Not So Much," *Foreign Policy*, 30 March 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/30/west-ukraine-russia-tensions-africa-asia-middle-east/>.

<sup>64</sup> Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, "India is Not Sitting on the Fence, says External Affairs Minister S.Jaishankar," Interview at the Global Security Forum, Bratislava, 3 June 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2R1z5\\_KBHw4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2R1z5_KBHw4).

<sup>65</sup> Walter Russell Meade, "Sanctions on Russia Pit the West Against the Rest of the World" *Wall Street Journal*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-west-vs-rest-of-the-world-russia-ukraine-dictators-south-america-asia-africa-11647894483>.

hunt," which included "fascistic" demand for Russian artists to "ritually condemn" Putin's actions.<sup>66</sup>

The ontological arguments advanced by the West and Russia to justify their preferred versions of world order fail to resonate among most non-Western states. They see liberal universalism, which is largely based on the Western experiences, as ill-suited to a world of cultural and civilizational diversity. With the global centre of economic gravity moving to the Pacific basin, multipolarity was being a reality. There is little enthusiasm for continued US "liberal" primacy and deep concern about the dangers of unrestrained Western power. According to Walter Russell Meade, "To those who share this perspective, an unpredictable America at the helm of the liberal west is a greater threat to the independence of many postcolonial states than Russian or even Chinese ambition could ever be."<sup>67</sup>

They find the version of *sovereign internationalism* Russia is practicing in Ukraine reminiscent of old-fashioned colonialism. A return to coercive Great Power politics is anachronistic in a world where power is more evenly diffused between states (great and small) and counterproductive at a time when mounting global problems demand cooperation and coordination, rather than competition over the balance of power and spheres of influence. In a speech to the UN Security Council, Kenya's UN ambassador, Charles Kimani, compared Russia's actions in Ukraine to European colonialism in Africa and warned Russia against stoking "the embers of dead empires." Lamenting that "multilateralism lies on its deathbed," he urged the world community to work together towards "a greatness none of our many nations and peoples had ever known".<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Adam Lucente, "Turkish President Decries 'Witch Hunt' Against Russian Artists," *AI Monitor*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/turkish-president-decries-witch-hunt-against-russian-artists>.

<sup>67</sup> Mead, "Sanctions on Russia Pit the West Against the Rest of the World."

<sup>68</sup> Charles Kimani, "Statement During the Security Council Urgent Meeting on Ukraine," 21 February 2022,

[https://www.un.int/kenya/sites/www.un.int/files/Kenya/kenya\\_statement\\_during\\_urgent\\_meeting\\_on\\_o\\_n\\_ukraine\\_21\\_february\\_2022\\_at\\_2100.pdf](https://www.un.int/kenya/sites/www.un.int/files/Kenya/kenya_statement_during_urgent_meeting_on_o_n_ukraine_21_february_2022_at_2100.pdf).

## Conclusion

There have been many proclaimed decisive turning points since the end of the Cold War, including 9/11 and the global financial crisis of 2008, but Russia's war in Ukraine undoubtedly marks the end of the post-Cold War era and the onset, at the minimum, of an extended second Cold War. The belief that the end of Cold War I would allow the pacific qualities of the post-World War II settlement and the associated Charter peace order to flower has long been discarded. The war has also dashed any lingering sentiment that Europe has matured and found new ways to resolve its differences. Even a global pandemic and the pressing challenge of climate change were not enough to prevent the return of great power conflict to the continent. The war threatened the entire Charter international system as it had developed since 1945. The end of the Cold War in 1989-91 at the time was considered a moment in which the potential of the Charter system could finally be realized. Paradoxically, contradiction in the interpretation of the post-Cold War peace order ultimately threatened the Charter system in its entirety.

Geopolitics and great power interests indubitably played their part, exacerbated by the clash of normative interpretations. However, the intensity of ideational contestation and the severity of the existential representation of the conflict suggests that deeper processes are at work. In our view, the existence of two competing ontological models of politics ultimately generated a clash that in the end not only provoked war but also an epochal confrontation between alternative representations of political reality. Opportunities were squandered to create mechanisms of reconciliation and conflict prevention, such as the establishment of some sort of pan-European confederation, various patterns of functional integration, or the creation of a European security council within the framework of the OSCE. Instead, the Western ontology and its institutions, which had triumphed at the end of the Cold War, expanded in both institutional and ideational terms. In response, Russia's traditional security concerns assumed increasingly radical forms, accompanied by intensifying ontological fears about the country's viability as a distinct civilization.

By 2022, the issue for Moscow appeared to be not just a clash between alternative models of order but an existential struggle for survival. Secure in their own ontology, the Western powers simply could not understand the logic of Russia's actions and

hence ascribed them to evil intent and traditional Russian imperialism. The Russian ontology was very different, based on the logics of sovereign equality and indivisibility of security and status.<sup>69</sup> However, by launching its invasion, Russia repudiated the fundamental principles of sovereign internationalism that it had long proclaimed.

The ontological gulf had become unbridgeable. The repeated cycles of diplomacy lacked traction and became an exercise in talking past each other. War appeared the lesser evil in comparison with what was perceived as an intensifying security and ontological dilemma that sooner or later had to be resolved. This was the European great power logic that precipitated war in August 1914 and again in 2022. It compels both sides to fight to the bitter end rather than look for compromise. They become locked in a bloody and protracted stalemate that invites further escalation. While pathways to a diplomatic solution have been advanced, including some sort of neutral status for Ukraine and the bracketing of territorial issues for a set period, the ontological character of the conflict encourages both sides to view the struggle in existential terms, as one that must be pursued until the other side's defeat.

Understanding the conflict in terms of clashing ontologies helps shed light on why much of the *Global South* has taken an ambivalent position towards the conflict. While in normative terms condemning Russia's invasion as a violation of international law, many leaders from the South acknowledge the legitimacy of Russia's concerns about NATO and refrain from joining the Western sanction regime for fear that it may eventually be used against them.<sup>70</sup> The belligerents have tried to universalize the conflict, but for much of non-Western world, this conflict represents a resumption of Europe's endemic inability to establish an enduring and inclusive peace.<sup>71</sup> Above all, the *Global South* seeks to rescue the Charter international system from the internecine conflicts of the *Global North*.

The reservations of the *Global South* can also be seen as a refusal to become accessories to the ontological dimension of the conflict. A strong commitment to sovereignty and non-interference, the renunciation of bloc politics, and acceptance of

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<sup>69</sup> Grant Dawson and Nicolas Ross Smith, "Why Putin's Invasion of Ukraine had to Happen," *The Loop*, 2022, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/why-putins-invasion-of-ukraine-had-to-happen>.

<sup>70</sup> Mead, "Sanctions on Russia Pit the West Against the Rest of the World."

<sup>71</sup> Lynch, "The West Is With Ukraine. The Rest, Not So Much."

diversity of regime types characterize international relations in the *Global South*.<sup>72</sup> These principles are now threatened by the spillover from the ontological conflicts of the North. Contesting interpretations of the norms of post-Cold War order generated not only an intense security dilemma but also a civilizational debate over the character of political order itself. Europe, to use Mazower's term, once again became the *dark continent*. With the *Global North* once again crucified by war, the once-subaltern *Global South* may finally have an opportunity to find its voice.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

<sup>73</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 271-316.