



ORIGINAL PAPER

Conceptions of the Realist Current in the Recent International Context. Case Study: The Conflict in Ukraine

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Abstract:

The opposition of the two fundamental currents of thought in international relations, i.e. realism and liberalism, finds a fertile ground for unfolding and intense debates in the context of the emergence of the conflict in Ukraine.

States have interests that they constantly pursue, these interests are not compatible, therefore it is logical for each state to have strategies that help them pursue these interests, due to the fact that the growth of one state's power is a threat to the others, and each tries to improve its position on the international stage by maximizing power,

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a number of former Soviet republics proclaimed their independence. The Russian Federation, although weakened in the early years, strengthened, seeking to regain its status as a great power by trying to re-include the former Soviet republics in its orbit. However, this tendency of Russia came into opposition with the expansions of NATO and the EU in Eastern Europe. The two organizations have become, under these conditions, a stake for the former Soviet republics. Thus, the conflict in Ukraine, initially started as a confrontation between the Kiev regime and pro-Russian separatist militias, became an indirect confrontation between Russia and the West, in an attempt to restore hegemony in the area and the balance of power.

Keywords: *realism, international relations, balance of power, Ukraine, military conflict, hegemony.*

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The post-war world was bipolar, with two hegemons, the USSR and the USA. The tensions between the two states materialized in a new type of conflict, called the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a number of former Soviet republics proclaimed their independence and the Russian Federation diminished its power and influence, but it did not really accept the new factual situation. It sought by various means to regain its great power status, including the re-inclusion of former Soviet republics in its orbit (Mankoff, 2009: 242).

In its efforts, however, the Russian Federation faced new challenges that it had not known or anticipated, namely the sustained expansion of NATO and the EU in Eastern Europe. The two organizations have become a stake for the former Soviet republics.

This is the context in which the first crises and tensions appeared in Ukraine, a country in which two tendencies were manifested: that of integration into the EU and that of remaining under the tutelage of Russia. At the same time, the fertile ground for conflicts is given by the tensions between the Kiev regime and pro-Russian separatist militias.

However, we cannot contest the claims of numerous realist authors, analysts of international relations, who believe that, beyond interstate confrontations or the internal tensions of a state, one can find a manifestation and positioning of Russia against the West.

In *The Art of War*, the Chinese thinker Sun Tzu advocates a simple idea regarding the definition of the state, which involves war in its deep structure: "War is a matter of vital importance to the state, a matter of life and death, the way that leads to survival or disappearance" (Tzu, 2020: 19).

We will attempt an analysis of the conflict through the lens of the arguments that offensive realism offers to explain, understand or justify the actions of the main actors involved.

One of the oldest currents of thought in the field of international relations, which still has a great influence today, is realism. Relations between states take place in the absence of a world government. For realists, this means that the international system is anarchic, and international relations can be understood by deciphering how power is distributed among states. But power is hard to measure, its distribution among states changes over time, and there is no consensus among states about how to distribute it (Griffiths, 2003: 17).

The purpose of power is defined as the way in which political sovereignty is expressed in relation to other sovereignties or the degree of freedom that a sovereign actor has in the international system. Hans Morgenthau defined relations between states with "interest defined as power" as the structuring principle (Morgenthau, 2007: 75). On the one hand, the individual state actor is subject to a competition generated by the existence of other actors in the system, on the other hand, its mere presence in the system generates a reaction from the other actors in the system, which makes the reporting of the actor (whoever that might be) become self-centred. The egocentrism (or lack of altruism) of the state, as an actor of the international system, is the result of the system corroborated with the internal pressure generated by the government's need for performance (as a temporary manager of the internal political system), induced by internal politics. In fact, on the level of international politics, the minimum performance required of a state is survival in the system. This does not make the system immediately tend to eliminate weaker actors, nor does it automatically and absolutely determine the

tendency of actors to eliminate other actors, but it also does not give any assurance that no one will ever try to do this. In this context, the only fundamental interest of the individual state actor on the international level is the accumulation of "power" - that is, the only element that can ensure, in an ultima ratio, its survival.

So states need to gain power to survive in a competitive environment. Realist authors who analyze change in international relations focus mainly on changes in the balance of power between states and less on a fundamental change in the dynamics of the system.

Among the branches of the realist current we find Offensive Realism which believes that, in the conditions of a hostile and anarchic international environment, states must maximize their power in order to survive. One of the most important theorists of offensive realism, John Mearsheimer stated the five hypotheses of this type of realism.

In the first hypothesis, Mearsheimer considers that the international system is an anarchic one, but that does not mean that it is a chaotic system, anarchy in international relations must be seen as an element that orders the relations among states. In other words, the world in the realistic perspective is characterized by a race to increase security among states, and by war (Mearsheimer, 2003: 27).

According to the second hypothesis, the states have the necessary military power to be able to attack and possibly destroy each other, so the states are a potential danger to the others and that is why it is necessary for each country to seek the maximization of power precisely in order to protect itself from possible attacks from other countries.

The third hypothesis, which arises naturally from the previous one, is related to the mistrust that states have towards other states, respectively towards their intentions and those of the heads of state and state agents. States can never be sure that another state can use its military capabilities to attack them. The attitudes of state agents can change from time to time, a relationship of friendship between two states can always be changed to one of tension.

The fourth hypothesis highlights the fact that survival is the main objective of the great powers, but also of states in general. They want to maintain their territorial integrity and state sovereignty, resorting to various methods to achieve this objective.

John Mearsheimer's fifth hypothesis is that states are rational agents, aware of the environment, and think strategically in terms of their own survival. They are aware of the fact that a certain behaviour shown by a state can affect their security and that is why they are forced to make prevention plans against a potential attack, these plans are not necessarily defensive, but can also be offensive.

We try to apply these assumptions about the international system to the military conflict in Ukraine, seeking explanations of why great powers compete for power and hegemony, looking for opportunities to maximize their power relative to other states.

Between December 2013 and February 2014, following pro-European demonstrations materialized through street fights and violent protests, a regime change took place in Ukraine, thus Viktor Yanukovych, the pro-Russian leader of Ukraine, was removed from power, being replaced by a government oriented towards the European Union. Basically, Ukraine was divided into two camps. The first wanted Ukraine to be closer to the EU, and, of course, its integration into this organization, and the second was the pro-Russian camp, which campaigned for a closer relationship with Russia. Throughout these events, Russia's reaction to the unrest in Ukraine was hostile.

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The crisis in Ukraine took an unexpected turn following the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula by pro-Russian separatist militias. Things continued with Russia holding a referendum in the area occupied by the separatists, a referendum considered illegitimate by the European Union and NATO member states, after which the majority Russian-speaking population agreed to the annexation of Crimea to Russia. From this moment, Moscow's direct involvement in the Ukraine crisis became obvious. The situation continued with the occupation, by the pro-Russian militias, of government buildings in the Donetsk area. This fact led to the military intervention of Kiev, to avoid a situation similar to that of Crimea, confrontations arose between the separatists and the Ukrainian Army, confrontations that continued despite the fact that a truce was signed in Minsk in 2015.

Therefore, the conflict in Ukraine had, from the very beginning, Ukraine and the pro-Russian militias as direct agents. Ukraine is supported by NATO and the European Union, and Russia is the one that supports the pro-Russian militias. This support offered to the separatists is, in fact, a masked intervention of Russia, which does nothing more than act through these agents. A fact confirmed by Vladimir Putin, who recognizes the presence of the Russian military in the area.

Russia's actions in Ukraine are similar to the previous ones in Georgia and Transnistria. What is important to note in this context is that as Russia's power has grown over the past ten years, Moscow has sought to bring former Soviet republics back into its orbit.

Actors who support Ukraine have direct interests in this area, which has become a buffer. The European Union, after the integration of the former satellites of the USSR, expanded to the East of Europe, as there are discussions, which concern the integration into the EU, with the former Soviet republics. The fact that these republics are still under Russia's sphere of influence strains relations between this power and the European Union. In turn, NATO has expanded into Eastern Europe by placing weapons and troops on its new eastern border, which worries the Russian Federation, whose policy towards NATO expansion is hostile.

The intervention of the Russian Federation in Ukraine introduced doctrinal confusions, derived, in particular, from the predominantly non-conventional nature of the actions. The absence of a declaration of war and the concentration of actions on limited geographical objectives (Crimea and eastern Ukraine) seemed to favour the inclusion of the events in Ukraine in the category of "limited war", in which "the belligerents choose not to fight with their full capacity" (Freedman, 2014-2015). However, the means used and the way the hostilities were carried out, by executing various and simultaneous asymmetric attacks on the military, social, economic and political systems of Ukraine, brought into discussion the concept of "war without limits", different from the "total" one (characteristic of the 20th century) by blurring the military dimension (Metz, 2014).

There is a debate to what extent Russia perceived the Ukrainian political crisis from December 2013 to February 2014 as a threat or an opportunity (even provoked), with arguments for each of the two approaches. Under the mandates of Putin, the Russian state had abandoned democratic-liberal tendencies long before and was going through a process of consolidating an autocratic democracy. Internal stability and revenues obtained from energy exports had created neo-imperial premises, and Moscow had begun the recovery of international prestige by vehemently and constantly

contesting world unipolarity, as well as by political actions and military actions aimed at sabotaging Euro-Atlantic projects to the east.

It was appreciated that a potential materialization of the Eurasian Union would have established Russia's role as a regional hegemon, and Ukraine's membership in this project would have given it consistency and would have limited the expansion of the EU and NATO to the east.

The analyses highlight the fact that Russia is currently incomplete and lacking the geostrategic potential of the Ukrainian territory, given that Ukraine could be included in the Western structures, it could also host a NATO naval base, potential realities that are unacceptable for Russian politics and are perceived as a threat. A political and economic Eurasian community would constitute a means of consolidating regional leadership and the Russian imperial renaissance, true opponents of Western influence, Ukraine's membership in them being essential.

Given Moscow's policy of restoring Great Russia, and the fact that it sees NATO's eastward expansion as a real threat to Russian state security and identity, all states with a common border with Russia that display a pro-Western sensibility are doomed to be reconsidered and become buffer zones for it.

The conflict in Ukraine opened a new page in Russian foreign policy, its international relations and the formation of its security strategy. Russia is trying, by forcing the emergence of separatist regions identical to those in Georgia or the Republic of Moldova, to preserve the Russian cultural identity in the southeast of Ukraine. Ukraine is not only a geopolitical bridge between Europe and Eurasia, but also a strategic border between the EU and Russia.

For the Russian Federation, Ukraine is still an important piece in the geopolitical confrontation with the USA, along with Syria, Iran or Venezuela. The successful Europeanization and prosperity of Ukraine would call into question the effectiveness of anti-democratic regimes, with consequences for the foreign policy of other ex-Soviet states.

Another peculiarity of the conflict in Ukraine is that it can be considered as a true "limited war", a concept that has existed since antiquity but which, nowadays, more precisely after the Second World War and the appearance of nuclear weapons, has caused that limited war to be the most frequent¹. The concept is based on the consideration that belligerents can choose not to fight at full capacity, so that a conflict neither gains in intensity, nor expands in space and time. It is the situation of the Ukrainian conflict, where the confrontation has turned into a high-stake interstate war, in which one of the belligerents is a major nuclear power and the other belligerent is under the protective, soft-power wing of a military alliance that has an impressive nuclear arsenal. The large armies of the warring parties, taking into account the risk of escalation of the military conflict, did not move against each other, their capacities being kept in reserve, and diplomatic communications being continued throughout the course of the conflict. It is certain that NATO did not want and did not have the necessary leverage to get directly involved in the fighting, but it had to consider whether and how it could get involved by providing assessment, advice, etc. while avoiding a potential conflict that could arise between Russia and a NATO member.

With its own economic resources and maritime access, Russia has been able to sustain tensions and conflicts in Libya and Syria, demonstrating the ability to disrupt Western projects related to stability, energy or economic security. It is obvious that Russia's policy is focused on preserving the sphere of influence and strategic control

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over the decisions and political directions taken by the states separated from the former Soviet bloc, through strategies of economic dependence or through maintaining frozen conflicts based on separatism and enclavation.

The Russian Federation does not seem willing to give up its desire to influence the states within its proximity (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, etc.) and, as such, it is important to understand the goals and strategies used so that we can anticipate and counteract a possible similar evolution in states with geopolitical risk, such as Moldova, but even in NATO member states.

Returning to the 5 hypotheses listed by John Mearsheimer, the crisis in Ukraine is one of the many crises of the postwar period, which highlight the tensions between Russia and the West and which take place in the context of the anarchy specific to the international system. Thus, Russia, after the fall of the USSR, lost its Great Power status and is currently trying to regain it, by increasing its influence in the area of the former Soviet republics, at the same time contesting the current status-quo, in which the international system is unipolar. It is precisely this state of anarchy that gives the Russian Federation the chance to act, getting involved in such a crisis, in order to maximize its power, thus recovering its status. The only thing that limits this approach of Russia are the economic sanctions imposed by the EU. If, from Russia's perspective, the fact that the international system is anarchic is an advantage, because it can increase its power through actions against a neighbouring state, from Ukraine's perspective, things are the other way around. Ukraine is a state with limited military and economic capabilities compared to Russia, therefore in the event of a direct conflict with it, it is obvious that Ukraine would have to lose, therefore the anarchy in the international system does not help Ukraine in this situation.

According to the second hypothesis of offensive realism, the great powers, and the states in general, have the military power to be able to attack and, possibly, to be able to destroy each other, therefore, concretely applied to this conflict, the tensions between Russia, on the one hand, NATO and the EU on the other, cannot be consumed in a direct confrontation, which, given the military arsenal possessed by each side, would be a disaster. That is why the tensions between the two are manifested in the form of the Ukraine Crisis, through a support of the vulnerable side.

On the other hand, Russia, from the perspective of a revisionist state of the status quo, challenges the supremacy of the USA in the world and the EU on the European continent, not through an open conflict with them, but through an alternative method, represented by the involvement in the Crisis of Ukraine. Involvement that increases its power at the international level because it positions itself as a formidable opponent of a great power. However, Russia uses all available means, be they conventional or non-conventional, military or non-military, to endanger the neighbouring state, Ukraine, in a long-lasting war, thus prolonging the appearance of world "bipolarity".

Mearsheimer's third hypothesis regarding offensive realism describes great powers and states, implicitly, as being in search of opportunities to gain power in relation to their rivals (Mearsheimer, 2003: 27). This idea is valid for revisionist states, such as Russia, which before its involvement in the Ukraine crisis, made the intervention in Georgia an opportunity to increase its power in relation to the West. So, the actions against Ukraine are a new opportunity for Russia to reposition itself in relation to the Western powers and to increase its influence in the former Soviet republics. Unlike Georgia, where an obvious Russian military intervention took place, in Ukraine Russia

takes advantage of the opportunity, created, after all, by itself by supporting the separatist forces, carrying out a masked intervention.

The fourth hypothesis of offensive realism establishes that survival is the main objective of states that want to maintain their territorial integrity, survival being a valid reason. In the case of the crisis in Ukraine, we can speak of two cases of survival. In the first place, that of Russia as a great power, which resorts to actions against the neighbouring state in order to survive at this level. On the other hand, Ukraine must survive to maintain its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Mearsheimer's last hypothesis establishes that states are rational actors. States are aware of the environment and therefore think strategically. Within the conflict in Ukraine, this can be analyzed from two perspectives. First of all, it is about Russia, which is aware of the increasing influence of the EU and NATO in Eastern Europe and therefore tries to increase its influence in the region, destabilizing Ukraine, which was positioned in the front line of states whose objective is to get closer to the European Union and NATO, and distance from Russia. Russia's objectives prove to be rational and concern the strengthening of its influence in Eastern Europe using the opportunity offered by the crisis in Ukraine. However, Russia's rationality is questioned in the context of the economic sanctions imposed by the EU. These sanctions obviously affect Russia, from an economic point of view, and question the necessity of the actions in Ukraine, given that the economy is suffering, a dilemma that Russian citizens feel most deeply, but without being able to influence any political decision.

The second perspective concerns the rationality of Ukraine's actions, which chose not to cede territories, as happened with Crimea, hence the initial confrontations between the separatists and the Ukrainian forces. From this point of view, Ukraine is a rational actor that does nothing but fight for its territorial integrity. We must admit, however, that the military potential of Ukraine is severely affected by the confrontations with Russia and without foreign aid it would not have been possible to carry out this conflict for a long time.

Analyzing the intentions of the states participating in the conflict, we rely on an opinion found in recent articles on the conflict: "Both Russia and Ukraine aim to change the states' positions in their favor, but also the thinking of the masses and the population. In short, both states are trying to scare, Ukraine to involve the states in the war and Russia to keep them out of the war. Ukraine's propaganda relies heavily on attracting the sympathy of the member states of the European Union and NATO, but also on involving the civilian population in the war, and Russia's more elaborate propaganda tries to erode the population's trust in the authorities, in NATO and the EU, and tries to convince the population that sustaining war is not the business of other nations" (Ilie, Pârvu, Niță, 2022: 215-227).

In general, the current doctrine in the field of international relations has countless definitions and realist views, although one might think that after the Second World War liberalism should have gained much more weight and eliminated realist views from explaining and understanding the evolution of international relations. We make this statement all the more as we relate to the European realities, to the Euro-Atlantic ones and in general to those of the theoreticians who come from these states that can be considered states governed by the rule of law, liberal democracies, and that have fully adhered to the forms of cooperation and organization that have proven effective: the UN, European Union, NATO, etc.

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However, international relations are much more complex, after 1945 the cold war was established and the system became a bipolar one, therefore the theorists, especially the American ones, as well as many leaders, diplomats or advisors of the heads of state of the great powers returned to the realistic principles of international relations finding that they have had much greater applicability in recent years, especially in the last 10 years.

The anarchic world, as realists define it, will always have in certain regions an important actor with large interests, with a desire to dominate, manage and follow rules, but also with sufficient resources to make those rules that it establishes be observed. This behaviour will lead to challenges. A system open to challenge on the part of the rising powers or alliances between different actors can function as long as there is cooperation with other great powers in the system or sufficient capacity to enforce the rules imposed on the system. Great Power Politics translates into an inclination of the Great Powers to recognize each other's status, to respect it and to reach an agreement - Big Bargain - at the expense of the other international actors, instead of fight in a war whenever possible.

The previously mentioned bipolarism assumes that the world is divided into two, both geographically but mainly based on ideological differences and two opposing models, and these faults have created two opposing blocs, which face each other, without directly involving the two Great Powers. Rules and agreements can come from the negotiations of the two main actors, the only superpowers or great powers in the system.

The debates of the UN General Assembly and the rules for voting on non-binding resolutions are a reflection of multilateralism, only that in the last 20 years even the great powers, members of the UN Security Council, have been the ones that had radical and biased positions on global issues in which they were directly or indirectly involved².

Moreover, there are numerous criticisms of the UN Security Council regarding its actions. In many cases, they are suspected of being motivated by individual interests rather than the desire to protect world peace or the well-being of states. For example, the lack of intervention in the Darfur genocide and the long duration of negotiations at the UNSC level are assumed to be due to the economic interests of Russia and China (Russia, for example, was worried that the existence of tougher sanctions on the Sudanese state would make Sudan unable to pay for some Russian military equipment) (Bellamy, 2005). Often, equally serious situations do not receive the same attention from the Security Council, and some decisions are very difficult to make even where there are precedents.

To these controversies, add the lack of geographical representativeness of the permanent members (Africa, South America and Australia do not have representatives), creating an unfavourable framework for making effective and correct decisions. In the absence of clear criteria for intervention, the Council can very easily be suspected of protecting the interests of its members rather than protecting international peace.

Also, the right of veto of any of the permanent members only slows down or even completely blocks the decision-making process within the UN Security Council. During the Cold War and the tension between Russia and the USA, each of the states blocked the access to the UN of smaller states that they considered allies of the other member of the Council. The USA has been constantly and strongly opposed, since 1982, to any resolution critical of Israel - a traditional ally - and the situations in the former

Yugoslavia, which provoked numerous veto votes, this system only prevents the Council from making important, and many times urgent decisions, and endangers not only the stability of the countries in conflict but also the lives of the citizens of those countries.

As for Russia's position regarding the conflict in Ukraine, it is important to note the statement of the President of Russia about the state of the nation in front of the Federal Assembly, a speech that became famous because it refers to the "red lines" that must not be crossed. "As for the red lines, they are obvious. First of all, it is about our national interests, the interests of our external security, the interests of our internal security and not admitting any interference (...) in our elections or in other political processes. It is about the non-acceptance of an offensive discussion with our country, the non-acceptance of damage to the economic interests of our country". He warned the West that it would "regret" any provocation against Russian interests and said Moscow's response would be "swift and tough".

Thus, the red lines invoked are related, in Vladimir Putin's statement, to the burning or blowing up of relations - lack of communication or Russia's isolation in the international arena, challenges that threaten essential security interests for Russia. This approach can easily be presented as a direct threat to use force in international affairs.

We believe that it was not by chance that the Russian president used the term "red lines". The history of the use of this term dates back to the beginning of the last century, and the context in which it appeared should not be neglected and is certainly not accidental. On July 31, 1928, the Red Lines Agreement was signed, following the understanding between the partners of the Iraq Petroleum Company, according to which they should not independently touch their interests in the oil field, respectively the prohibition not to cross a certain line arbitrarily drawn to divide the space (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/red-line>).

In concrete terms, it means establishing conditions that must not be violated, under threat of the use of force and enormous costs if these conditions are violated. In international law, red lines are prohibited per se, because that means imposing unilateral conditions and threatening to use force against an international actor.

President Barack Obama also resorted to this term, in the context of Syria's use of chemical weapons against its own population, in the sense in which respect for international law, established international rules and a country's commitments, the drawing of limits and the establishment of an ultimatum are required, otherwise international liability is entailed.

Although the two interpretations of the term seem different, the term used by the Russian president is not accidental, linking to both similar political aspects and international law, previously encountered in history, as well as economic aspects, the term appearing in a case where it was required to regulate oil exploitation in a certain territory, a problem which also positions the Russian Federation among the relevant states as holders of natural resources, an important status in its assertion as a world power.

It is obvious that by imposing such limits and rules, Russia practically wants to establish a multilateralism, considering that the prospects for sustainable and predictable development of the international community are directly related to the ability to find effective solutions to common problems and to our desire to exercise a collective leadership, so that true multilateralism prevails.

It's just that this multilateralism desired by Russia is the one imposed after 1945, namely the one by which all international rules must be established within the UN, with

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Russia having the right of veto in all matters, including the New World Order. Russia, like most states, is convinced that such a work must be carried out only on the basis of universally recognized rules of international law. The United Nations must serve as the key platform for coordinated efforts: it is the backbone of the modern global order, in which all independent states are represented. Today, its unique legitimacy and unique capabilities are especially needed. The main provisions of international law enshrined in the UN Charter have stood the test of time. Russia calls on all states to unconditionally respect the motivations and principles of the Charter. Russia wants to return to Yalta-style arrangements and Big Bargains to settle the world of tomorrow, recalling Vladimir Putin's proposal for a meeting of the permanent members of the UN Security Council for this bargain, or at least a US–Russia meeting, to settle the rules of the game going forward. What could be more natural than discussing targets for strengthening multilateralism at the UNO? This fact proves the true attitude of the West towards multilateralism and the UN, which they do not see as a universal format for developing solutions acceptable to all" (https://www.defenseromania.ro/discursul-lui-lavrov-de-la-minsk-un-compendiu-de-ideologie-rusa-de-securitate-actualizata_625409.html).

It is understandable why Russia prefers to refer to universally agreed rules as those established within the UN Security Council.

The sovereign equality of states - a principle extracted directly from the UN Charter - is de facto rejected when only the Great Powers are qualified to discuss the future of the world, especially when the great powers have the right of veto in this body and the issues subject to debate and vote directly or indirectly.

The demand to place all international institutions, norms and agreements under the UN and under the veto power of the Security Council is an excess of interpretation, a claim that has never been accepted by the international community. The need to revise the UN Charter, as well as the rules of the Security Council, primarily the veto of the permanent members, has been frequently requested in all debates on multilateralism.

This multilateralism involves bringing together and combining the full weight of all democracies to achieve a dominant global majority to shape and propose the rules. The international system, including that established by the United Nations, is based on democracy, human rights and freedoms, and the freedom of countries to associate freely, based on democratic rules, translated at the international level. The supremacy of law, the rule of law, the sovereign equality of states are part of the general *acquis* and any relativization of these rules, any rejection or limitation of the freedoms of states or people constitutes a violation of this common understanding of international law. The fundamental anarchism of the international system also means the freedom of states to associate in the way they consider to be the most appropriate and advantageous for their interests, but also in a sustainable form, respecting the same set of principles and values.

One of the most common assumptions that realists have shared when analyzing power is that to be powerful is to possess the means to dominate in conflict situations. It is assumed that being powerful and having control over the consequences are the same thing: the one who will win in the conflict is the most powerful, or if the one considered powerful does not win, it means that the other side is the powerful, thus validating the theory (Guzzini, 2000: 79-80). It is also the reason why Russia started the conflict, convinced that it has nothing to lose, from the perspective of proving this theory, respectively establishing its status as a great power in this way (winning or minimizing the relevance of the direct and indirect adversary).

In an international field characterized by multiplicity, as defined by Hans Morgenthau, if one actor wants to ensure its security by accumulating power, its approach will increase the feeling of insecurity of another actor, who will respond by accumulating power. "Power competition arises because no one can feel secure in a world of competing elements, security and the accumulation of power being engaged in a vicious circle." (Hertz, 1950)

We began our approach to understanding the conflict in Ukraine with the theories of John Mearsheimer, and it is no coincidence that we return to his views at the end of the article because he is one of the most controversial realist authors today. This is because, in the recent opinions expressed, he even tends to contradict his own theories or to interpret and nuance them in terms that seem to justify the military intervention of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, which is why the theorist has been accused of being a partisan of President Putin.

In 2001, Mearsheimer had a theory regarding the great powers, which want to expand as much as possible, to expand their power, to become the most important state in the international system, to become a hegemon. So, from this perspective, Russia is doing what is typical of it. For realists, all great powers act from this perspective in the same way, regardless of their form of state, of government, democracies or totalitarian systems, what degree of culture and civilization they have, only the distribution of material and military power in the international system is important.

On the other hand, the same realist author Mearsheimer has other arguments to explain the phenomenon of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. He believes and argues that the West, NATO, is responsible for the aggressive, revisionist, imperialist behaviour of the Russian Federation. NATO expansion by the US is the cause of revisionist behaviour and the causal logic of this argument is as follows: there was an expansion of NATO in 1990-2000 that produced insecurity and fear in Moscow because it produces a shift from a passive policy to a revisionist policy. This theory of Mearsheimer's contradicts the fundamental premise of 2002: if the great powers are expansionist, then NATO expansion should not matter. But in 2015, he changed his view, considering that Russia is expanding only because it feels threatened by the West. Russian revisionism also determines public policies: the West should leave Russia alone, being guilty of expansion.

For many authors, the end of the cold war did not change the reality: big, powerful states continue to dominate, seize power, and small states tolerate this behaviour. When you have a neighbour that is stronger than you, you invest more in defence to balance the danger, you turn to external balancing, alignment with other states, or you resort to what realist theorists call bandwagoning.

The liberal theorists believed that the threat that Putin feels is that, if the Ukrainian model were to succeed - a former Soviet state that becomes a democratic state governed by the rule of law and follows the path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, this would demonstrate the success of this model and would abolish all Russian conceptions on maintaining an autocracy and economic dependence on the Russian Federation.

Regardless of the end of the military confrontation in Ukraine, which is considered to be long-lasting, the most important consequence, for international relations, will be the reorganization of the international system and the redefinition of the poles of power, respectively the long announced and declared, after 2022, "New world order".

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Notes:

¹ Since 1945 and the advent of nuclear weapons, limited war has become the normal type of war. After World War II, due to its global position, the United States was involved in a limited number of wars. The Korean, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq wars were all examples of limited wars. The goal of at least one of the parties involved in a limited war is to maintain their freedom and preserve themselves. Often the strategy used, especially against a much stronger enemy, is to prolong the fight until the other side tires and finally decides to give up. This worked for George Washington in the American Revolutionary War. Although the British Army was the strongest military in the world at the time, the war dragged on until the British were tired of the war draining their resources. Today, the Taliban and other Islamist groups continue their wars in an attempt to exhaust their enemies in the Western world.

² The decisions of the Security Council regarding Iraq were decisively influenced by the position of the US, a permanent member; The UN Security Council refrained from using the words "war", "conflict" or "invasion", in the first communiqué on the war in Ukraine, but communicated "the deep concern regarding the maintenance of the peace and security of Ukraine". With veto power in the Council, Russia has blocked all previous attempts to adopt a declaration on Ukraine.

³ The book of John Mearsheimer, *Tragedia politicii de forță*, published in Romania by Antet Publishing House in 2003 and previously cited, first came out with the title "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", in 2001, published by W.W. Norton & Company.

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