

# U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

*This essay assesses the impact of the war in Ukraine on American foreign policy. The thesis provided here is that the war in Ukraine must be viewed as a painful but maybe necessary shock therapy that has helped to relieve the residual hangover from America's two-decade-long, ill-advised war on terror and the lost wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In parallel, the war has served as a vehicle for the reinvigoration of national grand strategy and the foreign policy that provides the vital connective tissue between ends, ways, and means. In this trinity, the foreign policy represents an instrumental tool to connect the assumptions that undergird grand strategy to the practical, real-world of international politics.*

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*Keywords: Grand Strategy, Russian Invasion of Ukraine,  
U.S. Foreign Policy, U.S. Primacy, War on Terror (WOT).*



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## *The Prelude*

America's reaction to the war in Ukraine is nested in a broader phenomenon that, some would argue, has seen America wandering in a foreign policy wilderness since the end of the Cold War. As nonsensical as it may seem, given the "victory" over the Soviet Union, the post-Cold War era saw the United States struggle to articulate sensible, straightforward strategic priorities around which to structure grand strategy, and foreign policy, and to specify the role of force as an instrument thereof. The Clinton administration used then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's references to the threat presented by "rogue regimes" such as North Korea, Iran, and Iraq to successfully avoid the "peace dividend" budget chop, which threatened to eliminate defense programs and reduce force structure. By contrast, the European social democracies and NATO members disarmed, gutting their militaries and defense budgets to strengthen their social contracts. By and large, European states redirected funds spent on their armies to health care, education, and infrastructure.

The strategic and sideways drift of the 1990s eventually ended with the 9/11 attacks, and the full-throated militaristic embrace of the global battlefield proclaimed and packaged up under the so-called "War on Terror," or WOT. The WOT proved far worse than the more benign conceptual drift of the 1990s. In the 1990s, the United States became enamored of aerial policing in places like the Balkans and the Middle East as the preferred instrument to influence objectionable politics on the ground. After 9/11, the country's land forces got handed the job of directly refereeing local politics on the basis to disastrous effect, accumulating staggering monetary and human costs in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the broader Middle East. America's trail of blood-soaked wreckage indeed stretched far and wide in the post-9/11 era.<sup>1</sup>

However, America's foreign policy choices of the 1990s and the post-9/11 era did not appear in a vacuum but instead grew from conceptual and theoretical roots in the academic and broader foreign policy community. A constant of America's post-Cold War era has been the continuous and unresolved argument between various foreign policy schools that indelibly shaped the choices of multiple administrations that moved through the White House. The Biden Administration and its reaction to the war in Ukraine is no exception.

Over the 30 years since the Cold War's end, three schools of thought have dominated

<sup>1</sup> The *Costs of War Project* compiled by researchers at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University estimates that the United States incurred over \$8.04 trillion in direct budgetary costs on the WOT during the period between FY 2001 – FY 2022. The project estimates another additional \$2.2 trillion in future costs of veteran-related health care related to the wars. Civilian and military casualties in the various war zones totaled between 897,000-920,000, according to the project. An estimated 38 million people were displaced by the post-9/11 wars. Figures available online at <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs>

the foreign policy debate: (1) Liberal interventionists who argue that the United States can and should use its pre-eminent global position to shape the global order in ways that redound to America's (and its allies) advantage by adhering to normative rules governing trade, immigration, interstate relations, the use of force, and international law; (2) Liberal internationalists who mostly agree with the first school but also add in need to enhance global multilateralism as practiced through global institutions. This group also agrees with those from the first school that force can and should be used for moral purposes; (3) Realists, who, over the last three decades and during the Cold War, argued for a foreign policy based on a cost-benefit analysis of whether actions made the country more robust and more prosperous.<sup>2</sup> Realists mostly have argued against the interventionist tendencies of the first two schools that, in their view, have led to America needlessly over-extending itself and frittering away political and military power in wars that were of tangential interest to the state.<sup>3</sup>

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There is little doubt that interventionist supporters won the foreign policy argument during the previous 20 years, a discussion molded partly by the 9/11 assaults. The realist’s message of calculated restraint was preemptorily cast aside by the think-tank-based foreign policy establishment. Indeed, the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup>

<sup>2</sup> These categories are offered up as illustrative and in the opinion of the author represent the mainstream thought in U.S. foreign policy over the last quarter century. Of course, all foreign policy categories, or schools of thought, are muddled – with overlap between each of the different approaches. See Michael C. Desch, “Liberals, Neocons, and Realcons,” *Orbis*, Vol. 45 No. 4 (Fall 2001): p. 519-533. Desch summarizes the differing approaches to humanitarian interventions in this piece to draw distinctions between different schools of foreign policy. A useful summary of these schools and the debate referenced in this piece is contained in Emma Ashford, “Strategies of Restraint,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100 No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2021): p. 128-141. Also see Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne, *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors and Cases*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps best represented by Stephen Walt M. Walt and his various realist-oriented commentaries offered on *Foreign Policy* online at <https://foreignpolicy.com/author/stephen-m-walt/>

century featured a trigger-happy American foreign policy featuring its military forces deployed worldwide – even if to mixed effect.

All these factors precede and frame American foreign policy in the war in Ukraine.

### ***Shifting Geopolitical and Functional Attention***

Perhaps the most important development is that the war in Ukraine finally has wrenched U.S. strategy and foreign policy away from its geographic focus on the Middle East and South Asia towards the principal Eurasian land powers.<sup>4</sup> The push to extract the United States from its ill-fated misadventures in the Middle East is not necessarily new. Indeed, the Obama Administration announced a much ballyhooed “pivot” to Asia as far back as 2012. But almost as soon as the ink dried on that press release, the Obama Administration found itself forced back into the Middle East with various military operations against ISIS, dealing with the aftermath of the failed Libyan intervention, and trying to contain the 2nd order effects surrounding the disintegration of Syria and Iraq.

In 2018, the Trump Administration, enunciating an “America First” preference, once more attempted to wrench America’s attention away from the Middle East in its *National Defense Strategy*, noting that managing strategic competition between near-peer competitors in China and Russia had become a national priority. That “shift,” however, like the Obama Administration’s, became undermined by a growing confrontation with Iran following the U.S. unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The Trump Administration’s virtual abandonment of America’s European/NATO partners while simultaneously withdrawing from the Obama Administration’s painstakingly negotiated Trans-Pacific Partnership compromised any attempt to shift strategic attention towards peer competitors in Moscow and Peking.

The Biden Administration has aggressively seized the opportunities presented by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to thankfully consign the WOT to the dustbin of history. It’s about time.

In its place is an American foreign policy centered on geopolitics across Europe and Asia with a decided Atlanticist center of gravity. In foreign policy terms, this means that the U.S. has traded authoritarian, sclerotic, and untrustworthy states in the Middle East for historical and capable allies in Europe and Asia, with whom it

<sup>4</sup>The geographer Halford Mackinder forecasted over a century ago that the Eurasian land mass constituted the most important global strategic theater. See Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 23, No. 4 (April 2004).

can collaborate on more fruitful endeavors than the WOT's obsession with defeating violent Islamic extremists.

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### ***Reasserting U.S. Primacy***

The return to geopolitics free from the WOT straight-jacket has allowed the United States to reassert itself as the political fulcrum of the West, positioning itself as the global bulwark against the anti-Western regimes in Moscow and Peking. Indeed, the United States has embraced a much more comfortable and manageable strategic formulation that divides the world between freedom-loving democracies and authoritarian, rights-denying dictatorships. While not a purely Cold War formulation, the global contest between these two different systems certainly draws upon the era's metaphor of pitting good vs. evil along the geographic divide.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine allowed the Biden Administration to breathe life into this strategic formulation and virtually overnight reinvigorated NATO and the European Union, restoring both to their rightful positions as significant global institutions. NATO, in particular, found itself front and center as the preferred transatlantic security institution to manage the allied response to the invasion. Returning to a role not seen since the Cold War, NATO military staff immediately began integrated and coordinated planning to return U.S. forces to Europe and NATO's new members in Eastern Europe and the Baltic. The Biden Administration leaped at the opportunity created by the invasion to move ground and air units back into their former Cold War stomping grounds, once more inextricably tying American and European security together as an integrated “West” under American leadership.

Just as important, the Biden Administration took full advantage of the changed

political circumstances in Europe created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Virtually overnight, Vladimir Putin turned what had been European deaf ears to America's 30-year burden-sharing mantra calling for more defense spending into aggressive new rearmament plans. European political unity undermined by the United Kingdom's pullout from the European Union under BREXIT in 2020 disappeared in the rear-view mirror as Finland and Sweden actively and successfully petitioned for admission to NATO, turning the Baltic into a NATO-dominated lake. In the summer of 2022, the U.S. Marine Corps trained with its Swedish counterparts in various island archipelagos in the Baltic – a previously unthinkable idea for the historically neutral country.<sup>5</sup>

The reassertion of U.S. primacy in the transatlantic relationship had another substantial salutary effect. It has provided a proper political accompaniment to the undeniable strategic reality of 21st-century European politics and security: Germany is now clearly the most powerful country on the continent, returning to a position it has not held since before World War II. The old formulation of “keeping Germany down” as one of the main Cold War benefits of U.S. primacy in NATO clearly has been overtaken by changed strategic circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Germany must now be seen as the most important European anchor in the alliance as it embarks on an aggressive rearmament program to defend itself (and its alliance partners) from potential Russian aggression.<sup>7</sup> Germany's assumption of this responsibility working with the United States and its European allies represents one of the central dramas unfolding in the post-Ukraine war period that has given added urgency to the NATO article 5 commitments that call for all members to collectively defend each other in the event of an attack.

Not only has the return of American primacy stiffened European resolve to defend itself, it has also used this position to generate support for confronting China in the Asian theater – a case made stronger by the announcement of a “no-limits” strategic partnership between Russia and China 20 days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the NATO Madrid Summit in June 2022, the new alliance *Strategic Concept* identified China for the first time as a malign actor that potentially threatened alliance “interests and values.”<sup>8</sup> During the last two years, various NATO navies

<sup>5</sup> Helene Cooper, “Back in the Fight,” *New York Times Magazine*, 4 October 2022. As noted by Cooper, “...Russia's invasion of Ukraine upended 200 years of global pacifism for the children of the Vikings.” Article online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/04/us/politics/sweden-ukraine-nato-marines.html>

<sup>6</sup> NATO Secretary General, Hastings Lionel Ismay, 1st Baron Ismay is widely credited with the formulation that the purpose of NATO was to “keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” He served as NATO's first secretary general.

<sup>7</sup> The same is true of Japan in the Pacific theater and the confrontation with China.

<sup>8</sup> *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept* posted online at [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf290622-strategic-concept.pdf)

have patrolled the contested South China Sea as well as the Strait of Taiwan as a signal of their support for the Biden Administration's active attempt to deter further Chinese military encroachment and expansion. It's hard to imagine such steps being coordinated by the alliance absent the sense of strategic urgency created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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### ***The Return of Nuclear Weapons***

In what many might regard as another of the “back to the future” features of the altered strategic environment is the re-emphasis on nuclear weapons and their instrumental role in grand strategy and foreign policy. While Al Qaeda, ISIS, and its affiliates have remained unimpressed and undeterred by these weapons over the last 20 years, nuclear weapons have been restored to their central role in the strategic bargaining framework between the West and Russia.

Regrettably, the war in Ukraine has seen both Russia and the United States make open references to their nuclear arsenals, with Russian President Vladimir Putin actively threatening nuclear use on several occasions. It is clear that both the United States and Russia recognize that these weapons have strategic, political, and (in Russia's case) military utility. The prospect that these weapons could be used has burst like an unwelcome thunderclap over the international system, serving as a painful reminder of their continued threat to humanity.

The war in Ukraine has seen the return of long-forgotten Cold War-era concepts associated with deterrence, escalation and escalation management, nuclear and conventional weapons integration, and extended deterrence and security guarantees. In the early 1960s, NATO adopted the doctrine of Flexible Response that recognized

the role of nuclear weapons in a “seamless web” of conventional and nuclear capabilities designed to deter Soviet aggression and, if necessary, prevail in a military confrontation. During the era, the United States deployed thousands of tactical nuclear weapons at sea and on land in defense of Europe, not to mention the French and British strategic nuclear arsenals deployed on submarines. It is clear that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has re-opened many of these same issues surrounding the possible deployment of additional nuclear weapons to Europe. The Biden Administration and its NATO partners undoubtedly face a period of intensive political and military consultations to address the means of common defense and the role once more to be played by nuclear weapons.

The war in Ukraine has focused on the divergent approaches taken by the United States and Russia to their respective nuclear arsenals since the end of the Cold War. Perhaps the most significant development is that the nuclear arms control framework between the two states teeters on the brink of collapse. The United States consciously has chosen to de-emphasize and reduce its nuclear arsenal, today observing the New START Treaty limits of 700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles, 1,550 warheads deployed on strategic systems, and 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers on missiles and bombers. The United States today regards Russia in violation of both New START and the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty that banned nuclear-capable ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500-5000 kilometers. In August 2022, Russia denied access to U.S. inspectors seeking to inspect the Russian nuclear arsenal as is required under the treaty and unilaterally canceled a routine follow-on meeting in November.<sup>9</sup> According to the United States, Russia has fielded a new family of nuclear-capable cruise missiles known as 9M729 that exceeds the range limits of the INF treaty. Perhaps more significantly, Russia has been actively modernizing its arsenal of tactical, flexible yield nuclear weapons estimated to number 2000.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it has articulated a military doctrine known as “escalate to de-escalate,” in which tactical nuclear weapons are seen as a powerful instrument to control escalation in a war. Thankfully, that doctrine has not yet been tested in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup>

There can be no question that nuclear weapons undergird the delicate bargaining framework created by the war – a framework being managed under the rubric of foreign policy. Both sides ultimately seek to deter the other from using these

<sup>9</sup> John Hudson and Kelly Kasulis Cho, “U.S. Accuses Russia of Not Complying With Key Nuclear Arms Treaty,” *Washington Post*, February 1, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Detailed in David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “Russia’s Small Nuclear Arms: A Risky Option for Putin and Ukraine Alike,” *New York Times*, 3 October 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Kofman and Anya Loukianova, “Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, 19 September 2022. Online at <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/escalation-management-and-nuclear-employment-in-russian-military-strategy-2/>



weapons even as they explore how these weapons can be applied for political and strategic effects. In some respects, the complex bargaining framework operates just as Thomas Schelling suggested in his seminal book *Arms and Influence*.<sup>12</sup> The escalation flashpoint in this potentially deadly interaction is the ever-increasing amounts of military aid in the form of lethal military equipment being funneled to Ukraine by the United States and its NATO allies.

The Biden Administration clearly indicated at the outset of the war that it would not seek direct military confrontation with Russia and would not introduce its own forces on Ukrainian soil but would consider Ukrainian requests for help in defending itself. Since the halting, early days of the war, the Biden Administration and its European allies have clearly opened the spigot to various advanced armaments for the Ukrainians that now total in the tens billions of dollars. Whereas early arguments centered on giving restricted weapons such as surface-to-air missiles such as the Stinger, the Ukrainian military is currently receiving some of the most powerful ground – and air – defense systems in Western arsenals, which are primarily credited with halting Russia’s advance and pushing back its armed troops. Advanced ground systems such as American, British and German tanks will arrive over the next several months.

The Biden Administration continues to make a calculated gamble that sending Ukraine ever more advanced systems, like the Patriot PAC III missile- and air defense systems, will not prompt an escalatory Russian response. So far, Russia has not attacked or attempted to disrupt the flow of arms into Ukraine. It is a delicate situation reminiscent of earlier Cold War-era confrontations. In Vietnam, the United States confronted the wide-scale resupply of North Vietnam by both China and the Soviet Union but ultimately decided against widening the war in ways that might have interrupted or prevented their support to North Vietnam. In Afghanistan, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan funneled military supplies to the Mujaheddin that proved critical in forcing the eventual Soviet withdrawal in 1989. So far, deterrence thankfully has held, and Russia has not widened the geographic scope of the war. Nonetheless, the Biden Administration and its European allies continue to tempt fate by pushing ever more advanced weapons onto the battlefield to assist Ukraine.

### ***Problematic Problems***

Several of the most evident effects of the war in Ukraine on U.S. foreign policy have been discussed thus far: a return to more strategic geopolitics; a reassertion of U.S. supremacy as head of the Western coalition; and the reintroduction of

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), Also see Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1960).

nuclear weapons as essentially political and military tools that underpin policy implementation. This analysis also suggests that the Biden Administration generally has done a creditable job in addressing these three areas and has shown diplomatic acumen in responding to the foreign policy crisis created by the war – skills that clearly were absent in the Trump Administration.

It is also the case, however, that the response to the war in Ukraine demonstrates that while the hangover from the WOT may be dissipating, some of the foreign policy bad habits established over the period remain distressingly prevalent.

At the top of the list is a pronounced national-level difficulty in properly relating the levels of war between the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Over the 20-odd years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, these levels of war became inverted. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, various American presidents and military leaders referred to “counterinsurgency” as a wartime strategy confusing the term with a series of tactics. These wars saw the United States elevate military operations and tactics to the strategic level in the vain hope that clever tactics and operations would substitute for strategy and deliver the long-and desperately sought battlefield victory. This was and remained an illusion: advanced weapons, innovative tactics and operations cannot overcome the political and strategic factors that determine whether one side or the other can impose their will on their antagonist. In the post-9/11 era wars, the United States piled up impressive-looking enemy body counts but decisively lost both wars.

What does this have to do with the war in Ukraine? It suggests a second prevalent problem: clearly articulating strategic objectives. The United States has once more entered a war (albeit indirectly) where the ultimate war aims from the American perspective appear open-ended and unclear just as they did during the strategically obtuse WOT. As was the case during the WOT, the United States casts its support for Ukraine under a morally attractive shroud of “good vs. evil.” Such a characterization might be useful as rallying cry and speech sound bite but is not particularly helpful in describing American objectives in the war – a war, by the way, being fought by someone else. Under such a formulation, the impression is created that the United States commitment is indeed neither time nor objective dependent, when neither is true. Some influential commentators, for example, argue that the United States must see the Russia “defeated” in Ukraine, while Biden Administration Defense Secretary Austin Long has stated that that the U.S. wants to see the Russian military “weakened” as a result of the war.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Missy Ryan and Annabelle Timsit, “U.S. Wants Russian Military ‘Weakened’ from Ukraine Invasion, Austin Says,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 2022. As an example of those arguing for a more decisive result, see Eliot A. Cohen, “Western Aid to Ukraine is Still Not Enough,” *The Atlantic*, January 17, 2023.

Clearly, defining objectives is a central foreign policy challenge that has not yet been met. To be sure, it is a delicate and fraught circumstance with multiple actors whose interests don't necessarily overlap. The reality is that American war objectives may not mesh with Ukraine's. Moreover, European interests and objectives also must be figured into the formulation, mainly if the "West" is to speak with one voice. If these partners don't share objectives, it will be difficult to agree upon when and under what circumstances the war should stop. Russia obviously gets a vote in this calculus, and, to date, shows no interest in a negotiated settlement. The political coalition of Ukraine, Europe, and the United States has heavy lifting ahead to define these issues; at the same time, all the parties seek to limit the possibility of Russian escalation that would widen the geographic scope of the war.

An essential addition to this list that was not present in the WOT is America's fractious domestic politics that undermines its ability to conduct a consensus-based foreign policy. Strangely, right-wing Republicans showed little opposition to spending money on the country's fruitless jihadi hunt across the Middle East and South Asia but are less sure they want to continue supporting Ukraine in its war with Russia. The new Speaker of the House, Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), has already signaled that the Biden Administration cannot expect automatic support for additional military assistance to Ukraine. McCarthy, whose own position as a speaker is far from solid, only reflects the reactionary sentiments of the unruly Republican House mob that appears more interested in undermining democracy at home than it does in confronting enemies of democracy abroad.

### *Conclusions*

The argument in this piece suggests that U.S. foreign policy in the war in Ukraine must be understood in the broader context framed by America's post-Cold War era search for a set of sensible strategic priorities around which to structure grand strategy and implementing policy. Indeed, the war has provided a necessary "shock" to the proverbial foreign policy system that hopefully has allowed the U.S. to move on from the disastrous post-9/11 WOT wars. The Biden Administration has seized the moment to focus on geopolitics in Europe and Asia and has reinvigorated historic partnerships across both areas.

The Biden Administration's reactions draw upon the previously referenced interventionist foreign policy mainstream in crafting its response to the war in Ukraine. Clearly, it has used the circumstance as a vehicle to reassert American importance in support of the liberal international order. In parallel, it has reinvigorated Western multilateral political and military institutions as a means to this end. This

view of foreign policy envisions an important – even central – role for the U.S. military that has since returned to Europe. Drawing upon the Cold War era’s past, the Biden Administration has once more returned the concept of deterrence to the U.S. strategic lexicon, ultimately backstopped by its strategic nuclear arsenal.

Whether the United States will continue in its position as the primary Western power – and glue for other allied nations in confronting Russia and China – remains to be seen. For the time being, there can be no question that the Biden Administration has successfully reconstructed Cold-War era relationships and the NATO alliance in confronting Russian aggression. Translating that same approach towards China is a more difficult, long-term project, the success of which will depend on drawing together a much more fractured collection of states that lack a cohesive threat perception to bind them together in collective action.

Lingering out there with the most tremendous potential for disruption to American foreign policy is the disgruntled right wing of domestic politics that prevents a unified home front with which to project unity and strength abroad.