Security Implications of Great Power Conflict in the International System

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Abstract

The work investigated the security implications of great power conflict in the international system with emphasis on the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, hundreds of thousands have lost their lives, and millions have been displaced, including properties. This has grave implications for global security as International Organisations strive to minimise the suffering of people in the war-torn zone. The Realist theory was adopted as the theoretical framework for the study; the theory was propounded by Hans J. Morgenthau in 1948. Secondary source of data was deployed; it involves the collection of data from sources such as textbooks, seminar papers, and journals etc. The work found that national interest is the underlying factor behind states' interactions in the global system. Every state is a rational entity strategizing on how to actualize its national interest. The study recommended that there is a need for states in the international system to abide by International Conventions as enshrined in the United Nations in the pursuit of their national interest.

Keywords: National Interest, Security, Great Power, United States, Russia and Ukraine

Introduction

Hartman (2009) refers to international relations as the political activities and other kinds of interactions among two or more states. He further noted that the academic field of international relations is a branch of political science that is concerned with the study of relations between states, the foreign policy of nation-states, and the mechanisms and institutions (such as international organisations, inter-governmental organisations, international and national non-governmental organisations and Multinational Corporations) through which states interact (Hartman, 2009). Quincy (2007), in his submission, noted that international relations are the relations between groups of major importance in the life of the world at any period of history. The global system is replete with different actors, states and non-states seeking to actualise certain goals. Although states are the primary actors in the global system, this does not undermine the activities of non-state actors, as they are capable of influencing issues in the global system.

States, being the primary actor in the global system, are rational in their interactions and dealing with other states to achieve their foreign policy goal. This point supports the realist school of thought that there is no permanent friend or enemy in the global system but rather perpetual interest. States are always on the move to actualise their foreign policy goal, and this is the primary responsibility of every state in the global system. In most cases, the pursuit and the attainment of the foreign policy objective of a nation are sometimes conflictual with those of other states, thereby leading to competition and conflict. This has implications for global peace and security. Although there are established rules that stipulate the conduct of states in the global system (International Law codified in United Nations Article), most great powers do not subject themselves to these international norms, especially when their interest is at stake.

The focus of this paper is on the competition among the great powers in the international system and its implications for global security.

Statement of the Problem

The international system is complex and made up of numerous actors with divergent interests. At every epoch in the global system, some states wield technological, economic and political inference over others capable of influencing issues in the global system in their favour. Such states can be described as great powers. Tsyganov (2016) describes great power as a political force exerting an effect co-extensive with the widest range of the society in which it operates. In other words, a great power is a state that has enough scope to successfully exert its influence and interests in the international arena. Thus, states such as the United States, Britain, France, China, and Russia amongst others can be described as great powers. Coincidentally, these states are all members of the big five (5) in the United Nations Security Council that enjoy veto power. One of the characteristics of these states is the ability to deter each other.

The Cold War era (ideological warfare between the capitalist bloc spearheaded by the U.S. and the socialist east spearheaded by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) created a bipolar world where the U.S. and USSR were the two superpowers during that era. During this era, there was competition between the two blocs for supremacy and influence in the global system. This created an avenue for intense competition that resulted in proxy wars that were fought in Korea (1950), Congo (1960), and Cuba (1961) etc. The implosion of the USSR led to a new world order described by many scholars of international relations (Ogonor, 2007) as a multi-polar era where there is a multiplicity of powers that can challenge and rival other powers for influence and dominance. The post-cold war era (present international system) has witness the emergence of new powers such as Germany, Italy, Israel, and even India etc.

The emergence of these new powers has made the global system more competitive as every state fights to protect its interests. This has complicated security as every state in the global arena fights to protect its interests. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022 is a testament to competition among the great powers. This invasion has led to the death of hundreds of people, the destruction of properties and the social displacement of people, creating the worst humanitarian crisis ever in Europe. This invasion has further worsened the security situation in the world and Europe in particular. The study, therefore, focuses on the recent

invasion of Ukraine by Russia as a testament of great power conflict in the global system.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

i. Investigate the factors responsible for the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

ii. Examine the impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on global security and humanitarian crisis.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for the study is the realist theory propounded by Hans J. Morgenthau in 1948. Realism is a theory that is anchor on power politics (realpolitik) and holds the view that the international behaviour of states is determined by the search for power and the distribution of power. The philosophical foundation of this school of thought may be traced to Niccolo Di Bernardo Dei Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Lysias (2013) noted that these philosophers were not realist scholars per se, but their philosophical rationalisations informed realist political thought. Machiavelli posits that political leaders should always be engaged with power, even during peacetime (Machiavelli in Lysias, 2013).

Realism, unlike idealism, believes that human nature is evil and inherently egocentric. Also, humankind is intuitively anarchic and conflictual in dispositions unless there are beneficial conditions under which they (humans) can cohabit (Lysias, 2013). According to Morganthau (1948, p. 56), "the interest of the state, defined in terms of power, is the primary moral guide by which policies are developed, but prudence in pursuing those interests is the primary ethical guide for policymakers. In the world of power politics, states must increase their power to guarantee their survival. Morganthau further stated (1948, p. 56), "the goal of the state has come to include the search for ways to acquire and keep power, increase power and demonstrate power. In short, in a world of conflicting states seeking power, or a world confirmed by historical experience and by the nature of man, states must engage in power politics to survive, and they should do anything prudent or otherwise to achieve that goal''.

According to Ogonor (2007, p 28-29), realism is predicated on the following assumptions:

1). The realist theory assumes that there is no essential harmony of interest among nations and that nation-states often have conflicting national objectives, some of which lead to war.
2). Realism posits that the capabilities of a state are crucial for the outcome of international conflict and for the ability of one state to influence another state's behaviour.
3). Power, they believe, has a military and non-military component, which includes not just military force but also the levels of technology, population, national resources, geographical factors, forms of government, political leadership and ideology.
4). Realists assumed that moral principles in their abstract formulation cannot be applied to political actions.
5). Realists further believe that the balance of power framework can furnish an important regulation device to prevent any one nation from achieving total hegemony within the comity of nations.

Methodology

The secondary source of data was utilised for this study. The secondary source of data refers to the set of data collated or authored by another person, archives, in the form of documents collected for a purpose other than the present one in which it is being used (Asika, 2006). Selltiz et al (2008) declared that the usefulness of secondary sources of data lies in the fact that information of this sort is collected periodically. Also, gathering information from such sources does not require the cooperation or assistance of the individual about whom information is being sought. The sources of data for this study include magasines, newspapers, textbooks, journals and seminar papers among others. The content analysis was deployed as the method of data analysis.

Results and Discussions

Factors Responsible for Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Within the field of global relations, national interest has frequently been assumed to comprise the pursuit of power, security and wealth. Neo-realist and liberal institutionalist scholars tend to define national interest as revolving around

security and power. Liberal scholars see national interests as a combination of the preferences of domestic political groups. Constructivist scholars reject the notion that the national interest of states is static and can be assumed *a priori*; rather, they argue that the preferences of states are shaped through social interactions and are changeable. National interest is the driving force behind great powers' competition in the global system. A more recent issue in the global system fuelled by great powers' competitiveness is the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The conflict itself can be considered as a clash of two opposing ideologies represented by the West on one side (the EU, UN and NATO) and Russia on the other side. The European Union, along with NATO, the UN, many non-governmental organisations, as well as the United States, represent the liberal democratic stance that is perceived by Russia as a threat to its existence and the status of the world's power.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine emerged around several issues. It is a complex interrelation of ethnic, religious, political, and economic interests. To understand the conflict as a whole, it will be necessary to investigate these issues which can be categorised into five groups: (i) Russian maintenance of post-Soviet states, (ii) Ukraine's sovereignty, (iii) the status of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk, (iv) Ukraine's sense of national identity, and (v) international alliances (with Ukraine being at the centre of conflicting ideologies).

Russian maintenance of post-Soviet states: The Russian Federation has a long imperial antiquity. Its sense of dominance and the need to prove it permeates much of its society. Andreas (2019) emphasised the importance of Ukraine for Putin and noted that it led to largely manufactured, yet nevertheless widespread, collective agreement within large parts of Russia's population about the rightfulness, justice and legitimacy of Moscow's various territorial, political, cultural and economic claims towards Ukraine. He added that Russian imperial expansion is to the support, cohesion and longevity of Putinist regime (Andreas, 2019). Putin's regret about the fall of the USSR, which he expressed in 2018 during the Truth and Justice Media Forum, reflects the general mood of the Russians (TASS, 2018). According to the survey conducted in 2017 by the Yuri Levada Analytical Center, 58 % of the surveyed population stated that it regrets the collapse of the USSR.

Interestingly, the number of people who regret the collapse of the Soviet Union decreased only by 8 per cent from 1992. Moreover, over the past two decades, it was indicated that what the Russians have felt most nostalgic about were the destruction of the unified economic system and the fact that people no longer feel like they were part of a world superpower (Levada-Center, 2017). It seems that the Russians were thus taken away that, which the Western Europeans have been enjoying for years. The Russian government's efforts to maintain spheres of influence in the post-Soviet states, therefore, seem to attempt to reimburse this nostalgia by having control over these regions. Thus, Putin's behaviour should be understood as reflective of the needs of the Russian society. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the Russian maintenance of the post-Soviet states, such as Ukraine, is an effort to unite the nation. Moreover, it is a response to the eastward expansion of Western European states.

Ukraine's sovereignty: Russia has been continuously interrupting Ukraine's sovereignty since 1991. The aforementioned causes of the Orange Revolution and the underlying causes of Euro-maidan are just examples of Russian interference in its satellite state. President Putin would prefer to control a person who is in control of the Ukrainian government rather than having to meander around the provisions of international law or economic dependencies. That was the case with Yanukovych, during whose presidency the lease on Russia's naval base in Sevastopol (the Crimean Peninsula) was prolonged, despite earlier efforts of Yushchenko to take this strategically and economically crucial port. The deal was done in exchange for discounts on the price of Russian gas that is imported to Ukraine. Moreover, many of the oligarchs who control the economy of Ukraine (it was reported that the richest hundred Ukrainians' value of assets was equivalent to 23% of Ukraine's GDP (Datskevych, 2019) and have business relations with the Russian government, banks, companies, etc. Why, then, is Ukraine's sovereignty more threatened than before?

Putin makes sure that his foreign policy actions are in line, or seemingly in line, with international law. Despite the lack of recognition of Crimea as Russian by the majority of the members of the United Nations, Crimea is practically governed by Russia. The war in Donbas is more complicated; however, the precedent set by the

annexation of Crimea puts into question the future foreign policy steps of Putin with regard to Ukraine and its sovereignty.

Status of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk: The series of events that directly led to the annexation of Crimea were initiated on February 27th and 28th, 2014, when pro-Russians seized important buildings in the Crimean capital, Simferopol, and within days they organised a referendum (Blidaru, 2018). The referendum yielded a surprising turnout and results, with 83% of the Crimean population, of which 97% voted for integration into the Russian Federation (CBS News, 2014). The Russian campaign was successful because in only three weeks, without the use of force, solely using diplomatic means seized all Ukrainian military bases and destroyed Ukrainian morale. As it was already mentioned, the status of Crimea is still legally unclear. Putin's concerns about the security of Russian minorities are rebuffed by most governments and intergovernmental organizations.

The referendum on the status of Crimea triggered other pro-Russian demonstrations in the Eastern-Ukrainian Donetsk and Luhansk provinces that border with the Russian Federation. Both of these provinces have the biggest percentage of ethnic Russians, with 39% Russians in Luhansk and 38.2% in Donetsk (Eurasian Geopolitics, 2014). Moreover, these provinces have the largest, 92.7%, percentage of people who use the Russian language (Eurasian Geopolitics, 2014). Donetsk and Luhansk are important regions due to their better-developed industry sector and quite rich natural resources. Shortly after the beginning of the demonstrations, pro-Russian groups established self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.

According to Lakomy (2016), Ukrainian domestic divisions constituted the initial source of the conflict. The issues that Ukraine has been divided on are perceptions of European integration, perceptions of relations with Russia, perceptions of common history, language, and culture, perceptions of the post-Euromaidan government, and ideologies (Banderism vs. communism) (Lakomy, 2016). The leading oligarchs support the pro-Russian groups, and along with Russian military support given to those groups, they are serious concerns for the government of Ukraine and its current president, Volodymyr Zelensky.

Ukraine's sense of identity: The need to strengthen the sense of national identity was recognised among the Ukrainians. At the same time, this identity is quite complicated as Ukraine is a multi-ethnic state with relatively large minorities, especially the Russians in the East. Moreover, it has been a target of many spheres of influence, e.g. Poland, the Soviet Union/ Russian Federation. It was suggested by Lakomy (2016) and Zwolski (2018) that one can understand the formation of Ukrainian identity as a response to the complexity of its position vis-à-vis Poland, Russia, the European Union, and, perhaps most importantly, vis-à-vis itself. Poland would feel more comfortable if Ukraine served as a buffer EU member state between Poland and Russia. Polish initiatives seemed to treat Ukraine instrumentally as a means of increasing Poland's security. At the same time, the Ukrainians face Russia's willingness to maintain its post-imperial state.

Thus, Ukraine is divided between its two neighbours, and the development of the sense of their national identity is thwarted by this division. Moreover, ideological differences that permeate the Ukrainian society hinder the emergence of a strong and unified national identity. Some people, especially those who live in Western Ukraine, would like to see themselves belonging to the European Union, while the predominantly Russian East feels a stronger attachment to Russia.

International alliances (the West vs. Russia): The conflict itself can be considered as a clash of two opposing ideologies represented by the West on one side (the EU, UN and NATO) and Russia on the other side. The European Union, along with NATO, the UN, many non-governmental organisations, as well as the United States, represent the liberal democratic stance that is perceived by Russia as a threat to its existence and the status of the world's power. The Kremlin seems to be isolated and facing the network of complex alliance attempts to minimize the influence of the Western ideology on former Soviet states, which, to a large degree, are still influenced by the Russian Federation.

Other factors largely responsible for the invasion are:
Relationships and Perceptions: Several relationships and perceptions have to be considered as they influence the nature and, at the same time, the complexity of the conflict. There are at least two divided positions within Ukraine, i.e., pro-European and pro-Russian. At the same time, the EU is not necessarily interested

in the accession of Ukraine to the Union, but it recognizes the strategic importance of Ukraine. Russia, after succeeding in Crimea, knows that the international community currently lacks a means of stopping it. Within Ukraine itself, as it was already argued, there are at least two perceptions regarding the conflict. Lakomy (2016) deemed the call for the transformation of the Ukrainian government in 2014 ambiguous. The pro-West/EU areas of Ukraine advocated European integration, liberal reforms, and, paradoxically, Bandera-nationalism. This was all to the discontent of the pro-Russian areas of Ukraine. The pro-Western Ukrainians constitute a majority of the Ukrainian population, and thus, their advocacy for respecting Ukraine's sovereignty has been supported by many Western European powers. Because of the growing sense of national identity, there have been efforts to minimise Russian influence on Ukraine, which, until the association agreement with the EU, relied significantly on Russian imports, thus subjugating its economy to Russian decisions.

Russia is supported by a minority of pro-Russian Ukrainians (who identify themselves as Russians), and its annexation of Crimea was recognised only by 19 members of the UN (e.g., Afghanistan, China, Cuba, and North Korea), while others still perceive the event as illegal. Russia and her supporters argue that they are trying to protect people who identify themselves as Russians from the oppression they could face due to being a minority. Moreover, Russia considers Ukraine's efforts to join the European Union as a threat to the Russian economy and also territorial integrity due to the spread of the "Western ideology" closer to its borders. As noted by Mearsheimer (2014, 77), the war in Ukraine, understood from a realist perspective, is an effect of the EU's expansion eastward and the West's backing of the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine. In other words, one can notice a certain continuity of events in Ukraine, which seems to be not necessarily a puppet of the Russian Federation but perhaps a means of promoting the Western democratic ideology and, thus, an object of calculations of the EU. The pro-Western Ukrainians hope that detaching from Russian influence will allow institutionalising democracy in that post-Soviet state.

Ukraine is aware of its dangerous geopolitical position vis-à-vis Russia, which could set up a two-front military offensive through the Crimean Peninsula and the Eastern border, where the illegal passages of the Russian military have been taking

place. The Ukrainians are also aware of their inability to face Russia militarily since the latter has much more resources. The EU and the U.S. perceive the Russian offensive as evidence of Putin's neo-imperial foreign policy, which threatens the Baltic States.

The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on Global Security and Humanitarian Crisis

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February 2022, and it has negatively affected Ukraine and complicated global security. As reported by the Red Cross, hundreds of lives have been lost and millions displaced (Red Cross, 2023). Before the war, Ukraine had a population of 41.6 million. As of 4 March 2023, 8.1 million people remain displaced – forced to flee from their own homes by the war within Ukraine and 10.3 million refugee movements have been recorded out of Ukraine (UNCHR, 2023). Another area of concern is the impact of the war on the well-being of Ukrainian children. Beyond the immediate threats to life, the war in Ukraine has led to at-risk children with chronic conditions experiencing treatment disruption. According to the International Diabetes Federation Atlas (2022), around 6700 children and adolescents were diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in Ukraine in 2021. The scarce access to essential health resources for these children during military conflicts is worrisome. Aside from the bombardment of hospitals and dispensaries that impacted the deliveries of healthcare and health services, shelling and bombing in areas with active hostilities also destroyed homes, schools, bridges, and nuclear power plants (Armantier et al., 2022). Due to the blockade of cities by Russian troops, wounded civilians, including mothers and newborns, were unable to receive appropriate medical care. Due to the blockade of cities by Russian troops, wounded civilians, including mothers and newborns, were unable to receive appropriate medical care. Taken together, the Russian invasion affects not only the lives and safety but the health and well-being of all Ukrainians due to the impact of the invasion on access to clean water, gas and electricity, as well as the internet and other forms of communication (Armantier et al., 2022). In essence, the Russian invasion has resulted in a humanitarian crisis for Ukrainians.

Several attacks were recorded in 82 different cities, villages, and municipalities; targets ranged from museums (9) and playgrounds (2) to bridges (13) and airports

(3). There were also five attacks on nuclear plants: three attacks in Zaporizhzhia and two in Chornobyl. An additional small-scale research reactor in Kharkiv also came under attack. Attacks on ammonia warehouses and the use of phosphorous bombs were also reported. Four attacks on food supply reserves were observed at Mariupol, Kherson, and Chernihiv. There was disruption to the electricity supply in 15 cities and to the water supply in 8 cities. According to the Public Health Center of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine (2022), the war has caused an enormous humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Urban centres in many parts of the country have been badly damaged, maritime, road and rail transit have been severely disrupted, and vital economic and social service infrastructure, including power generation, digital infrastructure, bridges, and ports, have been destroyed or rendered unusable. As of the end of March 2023, nearly 6 million Ukrainians had little or no access to safe water. About 12 million people are estimated to have been displaced as of mid-April, and a similar number of people—especially the elderly and infirm—urgently require humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2023). The war has led to a large refugee crisis. Over 7 million people have been displaced within Ukraine, while UNHCR is reporting the number of refugees (to neighbouring countries) at 5.7 million as of the 15th of April 2023 (IOM 2023). Large shares of refugees are women and children. Of the estimated 7.5 million children in Ukraine, 4.3 million (57 per cent of the total) have been displaced, 1.8 million (24 per cent of the total) are estimated to have fled to neighbouring countries as refugees, and another 2.5 million (33 per cent of the total) are internally displaced (IOM 2022; UNHRC 2023).

The wave of refugees from Ukraine will affect Central European economies. It will test their capacity to mobilise aid to meet immediate needs. The health, education, and social protection systems in some host countries already had challenges to deliver services to more remote areas and to include marginalised groups. This could impact host countries' abilities to provide basic services and impact refugees. Support will be needed for both refugees and host communities to avoid overwhelming local public services.

The Kremlin seems to be isolated and facing the network of complex alliance attempts to minimize the influence of the Western ideology on former Soviet states, which, to a large degree, are still influenced by the Russian Federation.

Mearsheimer (2014, p.79-80) pointed out that the "West's final tool for peeling Kyiv away from Moscow has been its efforts to spread Western values and promote democracy in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states, a plan that often entails funding pro-Western individuals and organizations". On the other hand, there is a Western concern for the respect of human rights in Ukraine, as well as Russia, and the spread of communist and, paradoxically, nationalist ideology in the East of the European Union.

Putin conceived the invasion of Ukraine as a means to protect Russia's security and national interest. It is widely expressed by Putin that Ukraine's attempt to join the North Treaty Organization is a threat to the security and national interest of Russia, owing to the historical antecedent that existed between Russia and the US. For Russia, Ukraine joining NATO will afford the US the opportunity to gain greater access to Russia owing to the fact that Russia and Ukraine share a common boundary. The unhealthy rivalry and competition between Russia and the U.S. has complicated global security, as evidenced by the ongoing war in Ukraine. The war, therefore, can be understood from the perspective of national interest.

Findings

1. The work found that national interest is the underlying factor behind states interactions in the global system. Every state is a rational entity strategising on how to actualise its national interest.
2. The study observed the competition among great powers in the global system is hinged on the need for great powers to maintain their sphere of influence in the global system. Thus, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia was intended to promote and protect the security interests of Russia.

Conclusion

The notion that great power competition threatens global security is undeniably obvious; the horrors of the 20th century are simple reminders of this fact. However, with the emergence of different great powers in the global system capable of deterring each other, relative peace can be guaranteed in the international system. The era where a single state can threaten the entire world is gone, as any potential threat in this 21st century will be fought by nuclear weapons where a click of the bottom can plunge the world into total annihilation. With this

thinking, the great powers are conscious of the use of force in the pursuit of their national interest.

Recommendations

1. There is a need for states in the international system to abide by International Conventions as enshrined in the United Nations in the pursuit of their national interest.
2. The international community should strengthen its enforcement mechanism so that rogue states can be punished to serve as a deterrent to others.

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