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Book review

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Review of *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived Itself About Russia and Betrayed Ukraine* by Alexander Vindman.

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Over three years have gone by since Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The current U.S. administration appears to view the resolution of this war as one that can be negotiated pragmatically by addressing Russia's political and security concerns while focusing on potential trade incentives between Russia and the U.S. The timing could not be better for the release of Alexander Vindman's new book *The Folly of Realism*, which serves as a stark warning against the historically utilised 'Russia First' approach in U.S.-Ukrainian relations.

Alexander Semyon Vindman (born Aleksandr Semyonovich Vindman in Kyiv) is a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army. Some of his most notable appointments include serving as Assistant Army Attaché to the U.S. Embassy in Russia under Michael McFaul, as the Political-Military Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2015, and as the

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Director of European Affairs for the National Security Council in 2018. As a Ukrainian-born American who served in the military and held important positions in government, Vindman provides a detailed, first-hand account of the American government's reluctance to adopting both, a more assertive foreign policy toward Russia, and a more supportive approach towards democratising countries of the former Soviet Union in the post-Cold War era. He argues it was the U.S. failure to adopt 'neo-idealism' as a foreign policy in the region, which would have prioritised the importance of values as interests, that enabled Russian aggression in Europe.

Throughout the book, Vindman provides specific examples of how post-Cold War administrations in the U.S. continuously adopted the foreign policy paradigm of 'political realism' towards Russia. This stemmed from a hope that, if treated with restraint, Russia had the potential to progress and act cooperatively on issues of mutual concern. An example that was given was the United States' pragmatic approach towards Russia after Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004-2005, when Russia interfered in the country's elections in an effort to prevent western-leaning presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko from winning in favour of pro-Moscow candidate Viktor Yanukovych. While the U.S. did not shy away from blaming the Ukrainian government for the lack of free and fair processes, it did refrain from criticising Russia. This may have been done in an effort to maintain Russian support for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan at the time as well as for the general hopes and aspirations that Russia would eventually evolve into a cooperative partner in the rules-based international order. Despite the United States' cautious approach, the Kremlin blamed western interference for causing the Orange Revolution. As Vindman states '…Russia was able almost immediately to declaim, unchallenged, a completely false version of events, in which the unseen hands of the United States had manipulated Ukrainian politics to bring about the Orange Revolution' (p.141). Russian President Vladimir Putin would later also blame the United States for causing Ukraine's

Maidan Revolution in 2013-2014 and instigating a 'coup' that ousted then-President Yanukovych, the winner of Ukraine's 2010 presidential elections.

After the Orange Revolution, Putin's speeches became more aggressive starting with his 2005 Duma speech and his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech. Putin viewed the 'colour revolutions' taking place in the former Soviet space as part of the West's grand plan to cause regime change in Russia. At Munich, Putin made it clear that Russia had a sphere of privileged interests in the post-Soviet space that it was willing to use force to preserve. He criticised the U.S. for taking advantage of its unipolar position by acting with impunity and without concern for international law or the security of other powers. Putin criticised the invasion of Iraq and insisted NATO enlargement in Europe was being directed at Russia. After these speeches, however, Vindman points out that there was a near complete non-response from the West.

The idea behind this pragmatic approach to Russia is the belief in 'Russian exceptionalism', or the view that Russia holds a special place in the international system based on its size, nuclear capabilities, military, history, and Soviet legacy. For these reasons, U.S. relations with Ukraine were always a derivative of its Russia policy. Vindman argues that this view was sustained by a foreign policy illusion that great power relations remain unchanging – an assumption of political realism. The realist paradigm in International Relations gained prowess during the Cold War's great power competition, was practiced by diplomats such as Henry Kissinger, and became popularised by scholars such as John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, and Kenneth Waltz. The paradigm emerged as a direct contradiction to Wilsonianism, which Woodrow Wilson supported after World War 1. Wilsonianism is derived from an idealist approach to the world which views American values such as democracy and freedom as universal goods making it a moral duty for the United States to be active in world affairs with the aim of developing those values. For realists, spreading freedom and democracy around the world is not always feasible due to the costs involved as well as the resistance that would meet such efforts. They instead advocate for prioritising vital U.S. interests and stability often at the expense of morality and values. Vindman argues that the realist approach towards Russia has failed over the years as pursuing pure national interests

without emphasising values ended up leading to various crises rather than avoiding them. 'In the process of selling out our values', Vindman states, 'we have failed to deter an aggressive yet deterrable opponent and lost a chance to form a strong relationship with a strategically critical, more likely western-aligned partner, Ukraine' (p.6).

An important opportunity to bolster Ukrainian democracy and ward off malign Russian influence was missed after the Orange Revolution. Vindman argues that a fatal flaw was to assume that Russian aggression was a product of a status quo power trying to hang on to its status as opposed to recognising Russian revanchism and revisionism for what it was. The author instead insists that Russia was, and still is, a revisionist power without the strength it once had but retains the same nationalist-minded elites clinging to great power status. Russia has simply been biding its time until conditions became favourable to subdue its neighbours again. As he underlines, 'the centrality of Ukraine as the myth of Kyiv as the progenitor of the Russian state is essential to Russia's exceptional sense of its status as a great power' (p.3). It was the failure to understand that Russia's greatest tragedy was the loss of its empire that led to wrong assumptions and policy choices towards Russia and Ukraine, thereby enabling the 2014 and 2022 invasions.

Due to their history under Russian occupation, Central and Eastern European states recognised Russian revisionism and revanchism far earlier than the West. In fact, many in the West still do not recognise Russian actions for what they are and continue to blame security concerns and Russian resistance to U.S. hegemony in Europe for Russian aggression. While Ukraine struggled during its post-Soviet development with internal divisions and lingering Soviet legacies in business and politics, after a decade of unwelcomed pressure from Russia, the country changed course to try to escape its fate as part of Russia's 'sphere of influence' and sought to reduce its vulnerabilities to Russian aggression. This shift was not well-received by the Kremlin. After Putin's aggressive speeches to the Duma and at the Munich Security Conference in 2005 and 2007 respectively, Georgia and Ukraine became increasingly insecure

and tried to apply for NATO membership only to be met with a tepid and disunified response from the West. At the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister warned that if Ukraine was offered a Membership Action Plan (MAP), there would be a tremendous crisis between Kyiv and Moscow that would be detrimental to European security. NATO nations ultimately did not offer either of these countries a MAP, citing corruption issues as the obstacle, and instead offered vague promises of integrating them as members in the future. Vindman essentially views this as the West having conceded to Russia's wishes to avoid a further strain on relations. Russia then invaded Georgia shortly afterwards. While the U.S. condemned the attack and called for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid, there were no real punitive consequences for Russia. In fact, a 'reset' in relations was established the following year as a cooperative gesture towards Russia which temporarily welcomed Dmitry Medvedev as president. As the West repeatedly indulged Russia, Vindman argues it was never incentivised to become a cooperative member of the international liberal order.

Instead, the author proposes 'neo-idealism' as a policy that should have been, and should still be, adopted towards Russia. It combines the idealism of Wilsonianism with the hard interests of realism by underscoring the importance of pursuing values as interests for long-term stability and American interests abroad. In so doing, 'accepting the primacy of values can provide continuity that informs policies based on short-, medium- and long-term interests' (p.232). Under this approach, the U.S. could have been more forceful in pushing Russia to reform in the 1990s in exchange for generous access to American resources and support. The U.S. could have also nurtured Ukrainian democracy as soon as it was beginning to flourish and been far more punitive in its response to Vladimir Putin's aggression in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 to deter its full-scale invasion of the latter in 2022.

I thought reviewing this book would be particularly fitting for me as I once thought it pragmatic to have an interest-based and practical relationship with Russia to preserve stability in Europe. However, in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, most realist analyses of the situation advocate for a quick conclusion to the war through a pragmatic arrangement that essentially

provides Russia with much of what it wants for the sake of 'stability'. The major assumption in these arguments is that Russia would stop behaving aggressively if its 'security concerns' were addressed. These writings essentially only make excuses for Russia's behaviour and reward its aggression without grasping the longer-term implications of continued Russian imperialism for Ukrainian sovereignty and European security. While it may be true that Russia has security interests in Europe, invading another country for these reasons can only be motivated by an expansionist foreign policy underscored by a belief that Ukraine, or Georgia for that matter, does not have the right to sovereignty and independence. Realism suggests that all great powers behave the same way when threatened and can be tempered and managed through establishing a stable balance of power often at the expense of weaker nations. Realism fails to account for the insecurity of Eastern European states wishing to escape the idea of a Russian sphere of influence and remain independent from a historically oppressive power. However, it is their sovereign right to pursue foreign policies that are more aligned with the West, and it should not be up to Russia to decide their fate. The international liberal order advocates for the preservation of international law, sovereignty, and territorial integrity – these are values worth defending as they form part of the United States' core interests as a nation. It makes little sense to reward Russian aggression for short-term stability because it does not address the core issue causing that instability – which is Russian imperial tendencies rather than its security concerns. As long as these tendencies continue to be pragmatically dealt with, instability in Europe will persist.

That being said, if there is any room for critical debate with Vindman's argument, it would be to consider if there could have been any 'third way' in the management of the European security and economic architecture that would have both defended U.S. values and interests and tamed any fires of Russian revanchism during the post-Cold War years. In a zero-sum environment, such as Russia perceives to be the case in Europe, one's gain leads directly to another's loss. In other words, when a former Soviet nation

would join an institution such as the E.U. or NATO, this resulted in a direct loss for Russian economic and security interests. A tendency to find the environment competitive might have exacerbated Russia's pre-existing imperial tendencies and motivated its illegal actions to protect its interests. This does not in any way condone Russia's actions, but it recognises that losing out economically and politically may have exacerbated Russian revanchism. In considering this, perhaps a 'third' way to mitigate zero-sum perceptions could have included increased economic and diplomatic initiatives between the E.U. and Russia, between NATO and Russia, and between NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (the Russia-led security bloc). Some examples that come to mind include the incorporation of an E.U.-Russia trade deal with deeper levels of engagement than the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (P.C.A.) of 1997, a NATO-Russia non-aggression treaty that went a step further than the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, and the establishment of NATO-C.S.T.O. training exercises. These suggestions of course may not have made any difference to Russia's desires to control its neighbours, but they could have reduced any 'losses' it may have experienced as a result of these nations joining these institutions and may have tempered its imperial ambitions without compromising U.S. values or the sovereign choices of Eastern European nations. It is hard to prove this argument as we do not have the counterfactual at our disposal. Nevertheless, it is too late to attempt this type of diplomatic approach now due to Russia's lack of good faith and its total violation of European norms and international law. This approach may have worked if implemented from the very beginning of the post-Cold War era. The response to today's level of aggression and rule-breaking must, of course, be one of strength.

In considering Vindman's policy advice, a neo-idealist approach to foreign policy could work in places that already espouse liberal values such as Europe and the Indo-Pacific but is unlikely to work in all geographic regions of the world. The United States has limited resources and should prioritise key regions of strategic interest where it should apply this policy to emerge victorious in today's strategic competition. This entails prioritising like-minded allies and partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific and warding off Russian

and Chinese expansionism and aggression in these regions. Though as we saw in the United States' lengthy stint in Afghanistan, spreading values such as freedom and democracy in places where it does not naturally occur is not likely to succeed, suggesting that such endeavours should no longer be pursued by the United States. Vindman acknowledges a return to some form of idealism during the neoconservative administration of George W. Bush, but agrees it was not an appropriate foreign policy to pursue. He states that 'in pursuing a war on terror, and in letting it drown out almost every other foreign-policy consideration, the neocons committed the [U.S.] not to a genuinely neo-idealistic policy, - tough-minded, clear, demanding of allies and opponents alike - but to an over the top mood of using American power to achieve a delusory totality of change, with delusory speed' (p.118). Vindman argues that the lack of attention the U.S. paid to state-on-state challenges during this time is what enabled Russia and China to take advantage of its distraction and absence. Nonetheless, it remains within the interest of the U.S. to prioritise certain key regions while remaining pragmatic in others to ensure a competitive edge in the former and flexibility in the latter. Especially considering the approach the 'Global South' has adopted as a response to global strategic competition, which is often one of 'hedging', or of strategic flexibility toward major powers.

Vindman details that the Biden administration's cautious approach towards the war in Ukraine perpetuated the United States' long-standing realist approach towards Russia as it sought to help Ukraine defend itself but not to help Ukraine win the war to avoid potential escalatory consequences with Russia. He argues that there was an overstated probability of direct confrontation with Russia and nuclear war. The administration's policy was based on avoiding that least likely scenario which made it lack true success. To make matters worse, Vindman points out that because 'this escalation-averse, risk-sensitive approach is inspired by the existence of the nuclear arsenal that distinguishes Russia from non-nuclear authoritarian states, the West has encouraged the idea that a nuclear arsenal is the ultimate security guarantee'

(p.200). Thus, he sees these policies as being directly responsible for increasing nuclear states and nuclear proliferation, as well as for an increased possibility of Russian expansionism to Moldova, Georgia, and Kazakhstan or even the Baltics, and the increasing likelihood that weakened democracies from internal divisions could face conflict with authoritarian states and possibly lose. Vindman may very well be right with these warnings. However, Biden's risk aversion was understandable in some ways – but I would also add that his Ukraine policy was distinct from the long-standing U.S. approach to Russia in that it was much more assertive. The U.S. imposed harsh economic sanctions and led a strong and unified team of western backers to help support Ukraine in resisting Russian aggression. It succeeded in sending a strong message and made it harder for Russia to achieve its goals. Still, Ukraine could have used additional support. For example, if Ukraine had been supplied with long-range missiles earlier on and had been granted the ability to use them to target Russian logistical hubs, Ukraine would have been in a better negotiating position today. In addition, the U.S. could have used harsher non-military means to place increased pressure on Russia such as stricter sanctions on Russian energy or even secondary sanctions to limit Russia's ability to conduct its war. It is unlikely that these policies would have led to escalation or nuclear war. On the contrary, they may have incentivised Russia to try and reach a negotiated end to the war on more appropriate terms today.

The current Trump administration is adopting friendlier policies towards Putin, going so far as voting with Russia in a United Nations vote condemning the war in Ukraine, and may end up rewarding Russian aggression by allowing Russia to obtain its goals of oppressing Ukraine and dictating its political choices through a 'pragmatic' agreement. Ukraine is unlikely to accept such an agreement. By the looks of it, Putin seems uninterested in ending the war as long as he perceives to be winning. The U.S. administration's overtures to end the war have so far not achieved much progress. The only solution to long-term peace in Ukraine is one that focuses on the root cause of the problem, which is Russian imperialism and expansionism, and not Russian 'security concerns'. As I argued, it is too late to try and minimise security concerns now that total war has broken out in Ukraine. As Vindman convincingly

demonstrates throughout his book, the West focused on Russian security concerns all throughout post-Cold War history and now needs a different approach. In my assessment, the only way to deal with an expansionist power is to contain it, the way the U.S. contained the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War. Containment is mostly accomplished through the use of effective deterrence postures. Deterrence is built through strong support systems from the West and solid security guarantees. The best deterrence in Ukraine would be NATO membership – but since there is not enough political will to make that happen, a second option which would provide a similar level of support and security guarantees should be offered to Ukraine as part of a peace deal to prevent renewed Russian aggression. Pressure should be placed on Russia to accept such a deal. Moreover, to increase deterrence in Europe overall, Europeans need to substantially increase their defence spending and bolster NATO's eastern flank. Just as importantly, the U.S. and Europe need to maintain a strong transatlantic relationship.

For Vindman, the West betrayed Ukraine when it forced it to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for some kind of vague and insincere security assurances in the Budapest Memorandum in 1996. An alternative deterrent to nuclear weapons for Ukraine could have been NATO membership, which the West declined to provide thereby betraying Ukraine once again. Without real security guarantees, Ukraine is not safe, and we should stop deluding ourselves to the contrary. While the goal with pragmatism and realism may be to try and achieve peace and stability, rewarding aggressive behaviour has historically led to increased aggressive behaviour and instability. Let us not betray Ukraine and the security of Europe anew by resorting to the same old tactics. In light of current diplomatic initiatives to reach an end to the war in Ukraine, Vindman's book, *The Folly of Realism*, could not have hit the shelves at a better time.