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Russian Insecurities: How Fear Drives Perception in the Near Abroad

Abstract: Interpreting Russian actions in the Near Abroad relies on the perception of Russian intent, but all too often states fail to analyse how Moscow interprets Western objectives. While defensive realist theorists argue that states tend to seek only enough power to survive within the system, the U.S. 2017 National Security Strategy argues Moscow is a revisionist state, seeking a return to great power status. Increasing tensions among the actors in the region gives rise to potential misperception of intent. This article analyses state motivations under a defensive realist paradigm and addresses how Russian actions may emerge from a defensive perspective. Using a defensive realist framework, this article elevates Russian insecurities and fear of Western influence in the Near Abroad as the primary motivator of state action.

Keywords: Russia; Realism; Perception.

The difference between conflict and peace relies heavily on determining an adversary's intent, and failing to accurately perceive another's motivation may result in catastrophic consequences. It is because of this rational fear of other states that nations tend to assume the worst in the actions of potential adversaries. This is particularly true in the reading of national security strategy (NSS) documents that tend to focus on the aggression of others while promoting a peaceful narrative of oneself. Western perceptions of Russian intent within the Near Abroad reflect this view of a benign self and aggressive 'other'. Perceiving another's action without considering the opposing rational leads states to aggression rather than fear. However, it is fear of the other within the anarchic international system that drives state action. Western interpretations of Russian actions within the Near Abroad reflect this fear of Moscow but omit the Russian fear of the West.

Defining the United States' perception of Russia is the 2017 NSS. The document states, 'Three main sets of challengers – the revisionist powers of China and Russia, the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, and transnational threat organizations, particularly jihadist terrorist groups – are actively competing against the United States and our allies and partners' (NSS 2017, 25). As a document that asserts its realist foundations, this is a defining statement of perceived threats.

The NSS then addresses how the writers of the document view the source of state rivalries. It states,

> "Although differing in nature and magnitude, these rivals compete across political, economic, and military arenas, and use technology and information to accelerate these contests in order to shift regional balances of power in their favor. These are fundamentally political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies" (Ibid., 25).

Again, this points to a global conflict of fighting for resources across multiple regions. According to the NSS, both China and Russia seek to reshape the world in a way 'antithetical to U.S. values and interests'. As far as Moscow, the NSS asserts, 'Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders' (Ibid.). In this

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1 The views expressed in this article are those of the author's alone and do not represent the position of the U.S. Army or any other government, institution or organization.

sense, Russia is a direct threat to U.S. interests as it attempts to become a great power, with the assertion that Russian national interest is focused on becoming a global 'pole'.

This perception closely aligns with the paradigm of John Mearsheimer's (2014a) offensive realism. Offensive realism's world of revisionist powers, seeking opportunities to advance their interests at the expense of rivals, formulates a bleak outlook on the international system. State ambition is taken to the extreme as states manoeuvre to reach hegemony, the only true guarantor of survival within this paradigm. However, significant questions emerge from this analysis, such as how strong is the case that Moscow seeks a new Russian world order? Are Moscow's actions reflective of a rising states seeking to collapse the current system? As an alternative to a world of revisionist powers, defensive realists take a more tempered view of state goals, arguing that the international system is comprised of states interested not in total dominance, but in enough power to survive. Within this defensive realist paradigm, could Russia be an insecure state, worried about its own survival, while appearing to others as aggressive in nature, causing a security spiral when neither the West nor Moscow actually seeks conflict?

The following sections will layout the arguments of defensive realism in terms of state goals and perception of rivals. The structure of the international system leads states to fear and distrust rivals similarly to offensive realism but maintains the majority of states only seek survival and to maintain the status quo. Misperceptions about rivals occur due mainly by the inability to distinguish between offensive versus defensive movements by potential adversaries. Penalties for misperceiving a revisionist power as status quo state are harsh, as failure to recognise the nefarious intentions of a rival could result in the destruction of the state in the way Nazi Germany overwhelmed France in 1940.

This article proceeds as follows: the section 'Goals and motivations within the defensive realist paradigm' discusses theoretic goals and motivations within the paradigm and the section 'Russian fear of Western intentions' applies this theoretical construct to Russia in terms of Moscow's existence within Eurasia and the broader international system and how the Ukraine crisis fits within this paradigm as Russian fear initiates aggressive behaviour. The section 'Russian focus on the relative gains' concludes with how states will focus on the relative gains of adversaries to distinguish benign from aggressive intentions. The objective of this article is not to present the Russian argument as an alternative to the U.S. assessment, but the possible issues with attempting to definitively view a rival as a revisionist power, seeking to upend the current international balance of power. Reframing the Western perspective of a revisionist Russia, focused on upending the current world order, to that of an insecure power significantly alters the interpretation of Russian action within the Near Abroad. The potential for misperception between the West and Russia is great and the consequences dire because of these states within the system must proceed with caution in how they determine the motives of adversaries.

1 Goals and Motivations Within the Defensive Realist Paradigm

The U.S. National Intelligence Council's (NIC) 2017 report, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress*, argues that over the next 5 years states such as Russia will take advantage of an 'inward-looking West' to 'check US influence' through 'grey zone' aggression and 'diverse forms of disruption' to stay below the threshold of direct armed conflict (X). This NIC assessment follows this statement with the warning that this brings the 'profound risks of miscalculation', referencing that limited conflict could potentially escalate into large-scale war. Within this assessment, the miscalculation is intended to reflect a small conflict that spirals into an unintended regional or international conflict similar to the escalation of World War I. Another potential misperception not articulated in this assessment is that of the objectives of a state.

Status quo powers dominate the system within defensive realism, as states seek survival, which produces profoundly different interactions than the aggressive world of offensive realism. Misperceptions are commonplace as states are motivated by fear of attack or possible annihilation. In this section, it is necessary to first layout the foundational assumptions of defensive realism to frame the discussion on Russian intentions. The second part of this section introduces the Russian perception of Western intentions as it pertains to NATO. Using Russian official statements and strategic documents is problematic, as their accuracy is questionable. However, first-hand accounts within the decision-making processes of the Kremlin are limited, so the accuracy of this data must be compared with the actions of the state to determine their authenticity.

Defensive realism's logic regarding the security dilemma is grounded within the concept of the prisoner's dilemma. Robert Jervis (1999) described the phenomenon as 'the ways in which the attempt by one state to increase its security has the effect (often unintended and sometimes unforeseen) or decreasing the security of others' (49). A simple game, the prisoner's dilemma, describes a situation in which it is in both the actors' best interest to stay quiet and tell the authority nothing, but should the second actor cheat, and the first actor is severely punished. Ultimately, the dilemma results from a lack of optimal option available to either participant (Jervis 1978, 171).

In many cases, the insecurity of states drives actions that are perceived as revisionist, particularly actions taken by states that fear a rival's advantage. Growing insecurity from a relative loss of power places a state at a great disadvantage should war occur. Military build-ups of one state can cause a reduction in security for another in two ways: first through the reduction in a state's ability to defend itself, and second, through a belief in motives by 'convincing the adversary that the state is inherently more dangerous that it had previously believed' (Glaser 1997, 178). Both the West and Russia have historical reasons to fear the actions of the other, as much of modern history places the two sides at odds, absent a brief, uneasy alliance against a revisionist German power.

The remainder of this article explores the U.S.–Russian relationship in terms of the security dilemma, exploring the possibility neither the West nor Moscow possesses aggressive intentions, but instead they experience a security dilemma. On one side, it is the West, dominated by the American power and the NATO alliance of free democratic states. Membership is simply the promotion of democracy, viewed as an inherent good and intended to reduce state conflict by making regimes answerable to the population. Led by the liberal hegemon, the West simply wishes to promote freedom and international institutions aimed at economic interdependence and peace. Georgia and Ukraine's invitation to pursue NATO membership at the 2008 Bucharest Summit was not an aggressive manoeuvre against Russia, but the promotion of this peaceful alternative. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said of the Summit, 'And that has had a significant impact on the nature of the Alliance; it has had a significant impact on the Alliance's commitment, dedication – and intensive dedication – to the cause of freedom' (Rice 2008). Alternatively, there is Moscow, the successor state to the former pole of the bygone bipolar era. It is a non-democratic state witnessing the growth of NATO, an organisation formed in hostility to its very existence. While the Cold War is over, NATO survives and thrives, continuing to challenging the existence of states such as Russia.

Russian and Western perceptions of the Ukraine Crisis were so vastly different, and it is hard to reconcile that they are discussing the same event. Former British Prime Minister David Cameron (2014) called the actions of Russia indefensible, stating that Ukraine's 'territorial integrity has been violated and the aspirations of its people to chart their own future are being frustrated'. Cameron's assertion reflects the Western ideals of self-determination and freedom. But Moscow viewed the Maidan protestors who ousted an elected government as a sinister move by the West to bring NATO to Ukraine, an objective sought since the late 1990s. Richard Sakwa (2016) argued the structural conditions of the international system, East versus West, caused the Ukraine crisis but the West prefers to portray Russia as a foil (5). Structurally, the growing Western military alliance taking over the home base of the Black Sea Fleet was too great a relative gain by the West at Russian expense to allow in terms of the regional power balance. The Kremlin expanded on the argument that the West's 'meddling' in Ukrainian affairs sparked internal instability within an already corrupt and unstable state.

The 2015 Russian NSS places the 'blame' for Ukraine solely at the hands of the West. The document states, 'The support of the United States and the European Union for the anti-constitutional coup d'état in Ukraine led to a deep split in Ukrainian society and the emergence of an armed conflict' (Section II, Paragraph 17). While difficult to unpack all the potential perspectives of Russia in the causes of the crisis, the document focuses on two primary reasons: the internal conflict between eastern and western Ukraine, as a result Western interference and the perceived demonising of Moscow by Western influencers. The security strategy continues,

> "The strengthening of far right nationalist ideology, the deliberate shaping in the Ukrainian population of an image of Russia as an enemy, the undisguised gamble on the forcible resolution of intrastate contradictions, and the deep socioeconomic crisis are turning Ukraine into a chronic seat of instability in Europe and in the immediate vicinity of Russia's border" (Ibid.).

Veiled within this argument is the advancement of the West, through the European Union (EU), into the Near Abroad.

2 Russian Fear of Western Intentions

Foundational to the security dilemma is the idea that one state's increase in security reduces the security of another, should both states possess benign intentions. While it is difficult to tell a state's revisionist intentions until after they have initiated conflict, it is useful to explore how an adversary may view one's actions to differentiate between calculated aggression and defensive measures of self-preservation. Unfortunately, short of access to historical files, like in Germany following the fall of the Nazi regime, much of these assessments must be inferred. For this purpose, the following evaluation of the Russian perspective takes the statements by Russian leadership and documents of the Russian Federation at, of close to, face value. Based on these data, Russia feared Ukraine's potential EU membership as a gateway to NATO accession. In that logic, NATO brings the militarisation of the accessed state by the American power at the cost of Russian security. In this sense, the loss of Near Abroad nations is a zero-sum game, where they transition from either affiliated states or non-affiliated states to potential NATO platforms of attacks against Moscow should hostilities escalate.

Contrary to the U.S. perception, even proponents of offensive realism assert the defensive motives of Moscow in Ukraine. Mearsheimer argued that the Western policies of NATO enlargement, EU expansion and democracy promotion pose an existential threat to Russian power (2014b). He blamed liberal objectives and the denials of Western leaders 'that Putin's behavior might be motivated by legitimate security concerns' (Ibid., 86). Alternatively, Western officials tend to shift focus from Western actions to Vladimir Putin and his fear of losing power. Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul (2018) argued that Moscow exaggerates the Western role in the colour revolutions as the West proves to be a convenient foe (84). McFaul seemed to dismiss Russian security concerns by arguing Putin's training in the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* or the 'KGB' led to his distrust of the U.S. McFaul continued, that while anti-Western rhetoric is 'theater intended for a domestic audience', Putin 'genuinely believed' the U.S. is a threat to his regime (Ibid., 86). This viewpoint dismisses the balance of power realities in preference for biases at the individual leadership level. In this regard, Western actions and Russian insecurities are dismissed as secondary factors to Putin's beliefs as the primary cause of international tension.

Russia views Western actions as aggressive towards its interests, regardless of how Washington interprets its own actions. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2016) summarised the Russian counterargument to the Western narrative. He wrote, "Western propaganda habitually accuses Russia of 'revisionism,' and the alleged desire to destroy the established international system, as if it was us who bombed Yugoslavia in 1999 in violation of the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, as if it was Russia that ignored international law by invading Iraq in 2003 and distorted UN Security Council resolutions by overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi's regime by force in Libya in 2011. There are many examples." It is essential to see how rivals view actions, as states will perceive their own actions as benign while perceiving those of adversaries as pure aggression.

The Ukraine crisis fits within this framework of a defensive Russian action for two main reasons. First, the potential enlargement of NATO, through the EU, into another Russian border nation removes both critical strategic depth in addition to the essential Russian Navy base in Sevastopol. Second, the military operations, and very design of the 'New Look' military, potentially suggest a force designed to protect Russian interests and with limited capability of challenging the United States or NATO within Europe. As defensive realism argues, states such as Russia seek enough security to maintain the status quo, before diminishing returns on military investment occur through overspending at the cost of the economy and appearing to possess expansionist intent. It is this misperception that drives states to see possible hostile states where a status quo power exists, and Moscow's actions in Ukraine signalled to the West that Russia has expansionist tendencies. However, the Kremlin argued that it is the West that seeks greater influence into Eurasia. At face value, these arguments may reflect a classic security dilemma.

Arguably, a post-Soviet era security dilemma spiral began when the former Warsaw Pact and Baltic state entered NATO, for while increasing their own state security they undermined that of Russia and the region (Sakwa 2016, 4). New NATO states received the protections under NATO Article 5 as well as acceptance into the West through the economic benefits provided by the EU's common market. In theory, small states, such as Estonia and Latvia, were no longer solely responsible for their own security, particularly against the potential of a Russian resurgence. Estonia's relatively small military budget, a meagre U.S.\$267 million in 2003 and U.S.\$281 million in 2004, no longer served as the only protection against Russia's estimated U.S.\$32 billion military expenditure in 2004 (SIPRI 2019). Moscow, on the other hand, then had NATO member nations on its border.

Moscow has remained sceptical of the security alliance, once aimed at defending Western Europe from the Soviet Union remaining in existence following its collapse. Richard Sakwa (2016) argued that NATO's very being is 'justified by the need to manage the security threats provoked by its enlargement' (4). While this commentary ignores why the former Warsaw Pact and Baltic states would perceive Moscow as a threat, it still serves to represent the alternative viewpoint, not of a benevolent NATO seeking peace and justice, but of a menacing military alliance taking over strategic territory through membership.

Furthermore, NATO is viewed as a lingering tool of U.S. dominance in Europe. For many realists, the survival of NATO following the Cold War says more about American power and influence over Europe than multilateral institutions (Waltz 2000, 20). Waltz argued, 'that international institutions serve primarily national rather than international interests' (21). In other words, NATO survived because it was in the national interest of the United States and its expansion continues to be a policy pursued for American interests. Moscow, therefore, perceives NATO as an imperial weapon of an expansionist, unchecked U.S. power.

To this end, Russia sees NATO as a weapon against its interests and a potential threat to its survival. Russian academic Sergei Karaganov (2014) argued, 'the West has continually sought to expand its zone of military, economic, and political influence through NATO and the EU. Russian interests and objections were flatly ignored. Russia was treated like a defeated power, though we did not see ourselves as defeated'. This perception is not isolated within Moscow. Prominent Cold War figures warned of the policy of expansion towards Russian borders. George Kennan (1997), the American diplomat and author of the original containment policy, warned that expansion of NATO would be disastrous for U.S.–Russia relations, as perception in Moscow questions the need for a military alliance following the end of hostile tensions.

Debate centred on whether the West 'promised' not expand into the Near Abroad continues among academics (for discussion, see Kramer 2009; Kramer and Shifrinson 2017). However, these issues are secondary to the security issues of strategic depth between Moscow and the West. Since realists argue that states pay close attention to relative gains from rivals, and since perceptions play a key role in this analysis, any perception of an advantage equates to an advantage. For Moscow, there is a perception that the admissions of former World Trade Organization (WTO) states represent these broken promises by NATO (Waltz 2000, 22). The 2008 discussion of membership to both Georgia and Ukraine signalled further 'violations' of this agreement, but the power gains remain the primary concern. During a March 2014 press conference, Putin expressed his frustration at the West. He said, 'We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration. And all this while Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West'. Putin went on to say that the West repeatedly lies to Moscow, 'This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders. They kept telling us the same thing: "Well, this does not concern you". That's easy to say' (Ibid.).

This fear of Western intentions towards Moscow includes membership in the EU. Russia perceives EU membership as equating to NATO accession. For many of the aspiring NATO nations, EU membership goes 'hand-in-hand' as the organisation is 'another major contributor to the goal of making Europe "whole and free"' (Sloan 2010, 122). This was especially true for the former Soviet Baltic states that joined both the EU and NATO in 2004. Western interest in Ukraine joining the alliance is nothing new. The possibility of Ukraine entering NATO dates back to a 1998 visit by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who told the state to prepare of membership by 2010 (Waltz 2000, 22). Despite arguments about whether the admission was realistic or not, the perception in Moscow is that NATO has been interested in Ukraine for decades.

Russia sees the EU as part of Western dominance in Europe and saw the EU's Free Trade Agreement with Ukraine as fundamentally anti-Russian. Timofei Bordachev (2014), a Russian academic, argued that the EU acts as a tool of the West against Russia. He wrote, "What precipitated the political crisis in Ukraine in 2013 was the idea of EU sages to use the free trade agreement with Ukraine against Russia. Brussels, having carefully studied Russia's policy toward its neighbor to the south, realized that any attempts by Moscow to escape this trap would look like pressure on Ukraine." In terms of a defensive realist paradigm, Moscow perceived the EU agreement as a form of reflexive aggression, or that the Kremlin had limited choices, none beneficial for Russia in a *fait accompli* tactic from the West. This perspective again feeds the notion that Russia felt forced to act due to Western expansion and the impact on relative gains between the state forces.

3 Russian Focus on The Relative Gains

Due to this fear of potential rivals, defensive realism argues that states focus on relative gains, as well as absolute gains, in comparison with other states. Specifically, realists fear 'that today's friend may be tomorrow's enemy in war, and fear that achievements of joint gains that advantage a friend in the present might produce a more dangerous potential foe in the future' (Grieco 1998, 487). The focus on relative gains causes realists to discount the extent states can cooperate within the system, and for this reason, they place little value on long-term alliances. Additionally, failing to curb the gains of a rival in time could become a catastrophic mistake, as an expansionist state's gains on a status quo power, in relative terms, places the benign power's very existence at risk. Within this paradigm, states tend to cooperate less, especially in terms of security and military capabilities with these potential rivals.

Expansionist policies, while not common, exist within defensive realism, emerging from instances of perceived insecurity. There are only limited instances when the international system favours expansion, as under an anarchical system the means to increase the security of one state decreases that of another (Taliaferro 2001, 129). This occurs most notably with the perception that a state will do harm to another or in instances when defensive measures are at a disadvantage. This occurs when states are difficult to defend due to variables such as geography or military technology. For these states, the search for security is difficult, and they may act aggressively to compensate for the disadvantage.

Under defensive realism states 'pursue expansionist policies because their leaders mistakenly believe that aggression is the only way to make their states secure' (Ibid.). This perception may be tied to the concept of the offense–defence balance. Structural realists moved beyond the basic concepts of an anarchical international system as the sole cause of war and then many incorporate concepts of polarity and the offense/defence balance to explore the variations of war and peace (Levy 1998, 142). The offense–defence balance argues that when defence has the advantage, war can be avoided (Glaser and Kaufmann 1998, 44). The high cost of attacking deters potential expansionist states from committing to the risk. Of course, how this is measured and implemented remains a question, as how forces employed through technology and doctrine are key variables in the outcome of war (see Biddle 2001). In particular, how other states view the military build-up for defence is subject to interpretation.

States may also adopt expansionist policies in direct reaction to the perceived hostility of another. The secondary effect of making one's adversary less secure is 'by increasing the values the adversary places on expansion, thereby making it harder to deter' (Glaser 1997, 177). In other words, the action places a greater premium on expansionist policies that the adversary otherwise would not prefer. Glaser wrote in 1997, 'In the current debate over NATO expansion, for example, opponents argue that even though expansion into Central Europe would increase NATO's military capability, it would also increase Russian insecurity and therefore make Russian invasion of its neighbors more likely' (178). In this sense, a status quo power can be driven to appear as a revisionist power based on a rival's action to increase its own security. Collectively, within a defensive realist paradigm, NATO's drive for increased security through expansion decreases Moscow's perception of security, regardless of the West's motives.

NATO's expansion, under this paradigm, is viewed at the expense of Russian interests. Waltz (2000) warned, 'The reasons for expanding NATO are weak. The reasons for opposing expansion are strong. It draws new lines of division in Europe, alienates those left out, and can find no logical stopping place west of Russia' (22). Since his writing in 2000, NATO has moved ever closer to Russia geographically, challenging the strategic depth Moscow holds vitally important to its security. The collapse of Communism in 1989 saw states such as Poland and the Czech Republic begin domestic debates regarding the 'return to Europe', resulting in the decision to join NATO along with other Central, Eastern and Baltic states between 2004 and 2013 (Sakwa 2016, 27). Expansions continued up to 2017, with the inclusion of Montenegro. Sakwa argued, 'On its own it posed no security threat to Russia, and it was only later, when allied with NATO enlargement and the aggressive promotion of Western democracy, that expansion encountered resistance' (Ibid.).

Western officials dismiss Russian insecurities. Ambassador McFaul asserted that the continued cooperation between Washington and Moscow under the post-Cold War system is evidence of this exaggeration. He wrote, 'The cooperative dynamic of U.S.–Russian relations established after the fall of the Soviet Union survived not only U.S. provocations but also two Russian military operations in Chechnya and the 1998 Russian financial crisis' (McFaul 2018, 84). Again, for McFaul the NATO expansion on served to 'exacerbate tensions', but for him, and other officials, Putin is the true source of the conflict. He goes as far to say that 'real political change will likely begin only after Putin steps down' (Ibid., 87). Although Putin's authoritarian hold over the Russian state is significant, discounting Moscow's security concerns as a ruse genuinely risks the misperception of Russian objectives.

For Russia, NATO enlargement brings the militarisation of the new member state, apart from Article 5 assurances. NATO's spending power brings new capabilities, weapon systems and tactics to support potential conflicts. In 2008, Putin expressed Russia's grave concerns for NATO enlargement closer to the Russian border. Speaking to journalists, he said, "It is no secret that there are serious obstacles to the development of our relations: the continued expansion of NATO, the creation of a military infrastructure on the territory of new members, the crisis surrounding the CFE [Conventional Forces in Europe] Treaty, Kosovo, and plans to deploy in Europe elements of the United States of America's strategic missile defence system – these things are not working at strengthening predictability and trust in our cooperation and have prevented it from moving to a new level." The inability to truly distinguish between NATO's offensive and defensive weapons capabilities becomes a point of contention, as what the West views a defensive, Russia, focused on the relative gains of the alliance, sees an aggressive intent.

Perceptions regarding the offensive and defensive intent of weapon systems are in play in terms of relative gain concerns among nations, the issue the expanding U.S. missile defence system throughout the NATO footprint Moscow views in starkly contrasting terms than the West. From Russia, this seemingly defensive capability provides the West with increased offensive gain. Jonathan Masters (2015) argued, 'Moscow believes the technology could be updated and may tip the strategic nuclear balance in favor of the United States'. NATO, of course, has a much different perception of the meaning and implications of its actions. The alliance insists the 'missile defence system is purely defensive and not directed against Russia. Bilateral agreements between the US and host nations do not allow missile sites to be used for any purpose other than missile defence' (NATO 2017). From Moscow's perspective, NATO's assurances that bilateral agreements will restrict any offensive capabilities are not reassuring, inasmuch as their existence in NATO's European force structure allows for possible offensive usage. For NATO, of course, the resistance of implementing defensive weapons calls into question Moscow's objectives in limiting another state's ability to defend itself against potential hostilities.

Ultimately the issue, under this defensive realist framework, is that of strategic depth for Moscow. Mearsheimer pointed to the use of Ukraine by Napoleonic France, imperial Germany and Nazi Germany to launch attempted invasions of Russia as why the loss of power in Kyiv to the West is intolerable (2014b, 82). Less depth decreases the security of the state against a former, and potential future, rival. At Putin's March 2014 press conference, he returned to his concerns over the distance of NATO to Russia's borders. He stated, "For all the internal processes within the organization, NATO remains a military alliance, and we are against having a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard or in our historic territory. I simply cannot imagine that we would travel to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors. Of course, most of them are wonderful guys, but it would be better to have them come and visit us, be our guests, rather than the other way round." This clearly placed the events in Ukraine at the centre of a major security concern for Moscow, as the Kremlin saw EU membership as Western aggression.

Moscow argues that its actions are primarily in response to an American containment policy, one hostile to Russian interests and intent on expanding regime change in Eurasia. The Russian Security Strategy states, "The Russian Federation's implementation of an independent foreign and domestic policy is giving rise to opposition from the United States and its allies, who are seeking to retain their dominance in world affairs. The policy of containing Russia that they are implementing envisions the exertion of political, economic, military, and informational pressure on it" (Section II, Paragraph 12).

On face value, this shows a Russia with great concern focused on an expanding Western footprint at Moscow's expense. However, Moscow's claim that its actions stem from defence against Western 'imperialism' comes through in Putin's speech during the Crimean annexation. During the March 2014 speech on Russia's annexation of Crimea, Putin stated, 'Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this'. Putin's metaphor of the spring reflects this view of the Ukraine Crisis as a reactionary event, brought about through the defensive instincts of a state.

Additionally, Russia's Permanent Representative to NATO, Alexander Grushko (2016), argued that NATO's militarisation is counterproductive to regional security. During an interview with *Kommersant*, he said, "We will do everything to reliably ensure our defences. Therefore, the countries that have declared themselves 'front-lines' are likely to see before long that the efforts that are ostensibly aimed to enhance their security will only undermine it. NATO is compelling us to view these countries as host-territories of substantial military potential and as such subject Russia to risks and threats." In this sense from the Kremlin's perspective, NATO enlargement backed Russia into action in defence of their security interests.

Russian choices to stop NATO expansion are limited, and should Moscow view NATO as the expansionist power, its potential actions to halt the spread of the alliance could appear aggressive. Peter Liberman (1993) wrote, 'Status quo states must rely more heavily on threats of war to contain expansionists, and on war itself if threats fail to deter. Unless they are contained, imperial rulers will swallow up weaker nations, growing stronger and more invincible with each new conquest' (125). This is why Moscow points to the issues of regime change under its perception of the policy of democracy promotion in Europe and argues that Russia was backed into a proverbial corner during the Ukraine Crisis.

According to Sakwa, Putin felt he was faced with a choice to do nothing or act decisively against what he perceived to be a coup executed by the West (100). Failing to act could potentially result in both another NATO-aligned state on the Russian border, and also the loss of the Russian Navy base in Sevastopol, critical in Russian defence capabilities. Support for this viewpoint of a Western coup went public as a leaked phone conversation between the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt suggests a clear U.S. preference towards regime change in Ukraine (BBC News 2014). Sakwa argued, 'Putin was willing to damage his international reputation and risk isolating Russia and alienating Ukraine to gain what for him was a crucial "piece", Crimea, and with it the Sevastopol naval base' (100). While this analysis is in hindsight and there is no evidence presented here to support internal Kremlin cost–benefit analysis, Sakwa's argument regarding possible actions from the West is valid. During his address to the Russian Federal Assembly on the annexation of Crimea, Putin condemned the U.S. actions. He said, 'They act as they please. Here and there, they use force against sovereign states, set up coalitions in accordance with the principle: who is not with us is against us' (DIA 2017, V). In this sense, Moscow's perception of the EU agreement and potential NATO membership in the future, he argued that it was forced into action by the expansion of the West. Should Russia be a status quo power, the perceived intentions of the West to encircle and challenge the Russian state forced Moscow to act decisively to protect its vital security interests.

To stop Western gains in Ukraine, Moscow employed hybrid warfare or measures to conceal its actions and remain below the threshold of sparking greater conflict with the West. It is worth presenting the argument within the defensive realist construct, that hybrid war is designed to operate within the Near Abroad, with a focus on protecting Russian strategic depth against the West. Glaser (1997) argued that the type of military build-up could help differentiate between a defensive-minded state and a 'greedy' one, which is 'more likely that a security seeker to add forces beyond those required for adequate defence of its territory' (179). The 'New Look' initiative in Russia streamlined the officer corps and placed greater emphasis on modernisation, but not on the size of the force. Alternatively, retrospectively, the German military build-up under the Nazi regime was clearly aimed at global conflict and regional hegemony.

The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) analysis on the Russian military states, "Russia views wars as often undeclared, fought for relatively limited political objectives and occurring across all domains, including outer space and the information space. Russian leaders have noted the tendency for crises to arise quickly and develop impetuously, and to potentially escalate from local wars into global ones" (2017, 22). The focus on the limited scope of conflict implies its local, defensive and reactionary use of military power.

Throughout the conflict in Ukraine, Russian operations remained subversive and genuinely localised to the Eastern provinces. Operations within Crimea began with 'stealthily deployed special forces' taking over political facilities along with cyber-operations and an effective disinformation campaign (Daalder 2017, 33). Ivo Daalder described the operation as 'Russian special forces, dressed in green uniforms without identifying patches, suddenly appeared at strategic points throughout Crimea and effectively took control of the peninsula' (Ibid.). These are not necessarily the actions of a force interested in sparking a larger, regional conflict with the NATO power, but instead interested in the localised goal of political change through coercive, subversive, measures. The broader implementation of Russia's 'active measures', or disinformation, propaganda, counterfeiting, assassinations and political repression, are not necessarily offensive in terms of producing the desired results of a revisionist power (for 'active measures', see Duncan 2017, 11). It is difficult to argue an assassination in London of a Russian dissident or of a Ukrainian politician would meet the criteria of seeking hegemony in the way Germany did in the 19th century (for assassinations, see Schwirtz 2019).

Support for Russian separatist movements fails to resemble a military force capable of challenging the West in direct conflict. Instead, for the very reason the West criticises its implementation, hybrid war is better equipped at operating within the Near Abroad, in a reactionary way against perceived Western expansion or advancement. NATO's confusion was the result of these tactical preferences by Moscow to obscure its intentions. Following the initial military operations to Crimea, NATO remained worried that Russia would expand operations, but this did not cause the West to initiate a military intervention. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen spoke before Chatham House on

19 June 2014, expressing concern of another Russian military build-up on the Ukrainian border. Rasmussen said, "You asked me what would be the consequences. I do believe that the international community would have to respond in a firm manner if Russia were to intervene further in Ukraine. And that would imply deeper, broader, more profound economic sanctions against Russia, which would have a very damaging effect on the Russian economy. So it would isolate Russia further internationally if Russia were to intervene further." Preference for economic sanctions by Western powers as a 'firm response' is still preferable to Moscow than a NATO base in Sevastopol.

4 Conclusions

Through a focus on the logical fear of other states, the perception of Russian actions within the Near Abroad changes significantly. Placing Moscow's decisions within the context of fear, fear of Western relative gains, calls into question the Western perception of Russia as a revisionist state with the aim of overturning the international order. This, of course, may not be the case as within a defensive realist framework determining whether a state is a status quo or revisionist power is inherently difficult due to misperceptions of motives. Essential within this argument is simply the understanding that the ability of the West to discern between offensive and defensive actions of Moscow is clouded by the fear of Russian actions to the West.

Within this defensive realist framework, Russia's motivations during the Ukraine Crisis were to halt the Western expansion, from NATO through the EU, to maintain strategic depth from the military alliance. Although within a defensive realist paradigm, it is difficult to truly know whether a state is a revisionist power, Moscow's actions still fit within the understanding of a defensively minded state, fearing the relative gains of a rival. This clearly runs counter to the current U.S. assessment of an offensively driven, power maximising state. States seek security and grow concerned over the relative gains of a rival. The expansion of NATO and potential loss of the Black Sea Fleet's port all point to a significant relative gain over Moscow, specifically in terms of a zero-sum loss. In other words, NATO would have an alliance with Kyiv at the expense of Russia. Moscow seeks security, which involved strategic depth from the West, while the West does not perceive the advancement of NATO and the promotion of democracy as threatening to Moscow. Theoretically, if both sides actually possessed benign intentions, this tragic spiral of fear and misperception results in less security for both sides and increases the chances of a conflict.

Within this paradigm, most states simply pursue survival while defending their vital interests. In this framework, greater NATO expansion or a significant increase in Western capabilities in Europe will drive Moscow to perceive an increased threat as it pays close attention to relative power gains from the rival alliance. Relative gains in the form of an increased alliance, closer to Moscow, as well as potential offensive capabilities in the region, make the Kremlin question the motivations of the West, and in accordance with defensive realist theory, may drive increased military build-ups. The risk of conflict over misperceptions on motivations grows as a potential security dilemma develops between both Moscow and Washington. Within this context, it behooves the states to question their bias towards perceiving adversaries' actions only in terms of aggression by one without placing the conflict into a larger balance of power context.

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