1 The Sources of Conflict over Ukraine

> But our idea is that the wolves should be fed and the sheep kept safe.
>
> Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

In the early morning of February 24, 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine along four axes with over 150,000 soldiers backed by aircraft, missiles, drones, artillery, and armor. While press around the world said that Russia had “invaded” Ukraine, Ukrainians and their supporters stressed that the invasion had actually begun eight years earlier, in 2014, when Russia seized Crimea and attacked Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, a war which killed over 13,000 people. By the autumn of 2022, despite thousands of casualties on both sides, the war showed no signs of abating. Instead, informed observers were girding for a long war.

What started as a “civilized divorce”[1] when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 became the largest war in Europe since 1945, with consequences that ricocheted around the world. Ukraine’s independence in 1991 took place without bloodshed. The East–West tensions that defined the Cold War had fallen away. For years, Russian leaders stressed that Russians and Ukrainians were one people. Yet in 2014, Russia invaded, seizing Ukrainian territory and bringing Russia and the West to what many saw as a new Cold War. And in 2022, Russia escalated the war dramatically, targeting civilians and calling for the destruction of the Ukrainian state and nation.

How did this happen, and why? How did two states as deeply connected as Ukraine and Russia come to war? How did their relationship come to drive the West’s conflict with Russia? How we answer these questions will determine in large part how actors on all sides approach the choices yet to come, including how to find peace between Ukraine and Russia and how to rebuild post-war relations between Russia, its

[1] The term “civilized divorce” was used to describe the dissolution of the Soviet Union even prior to its collapse, and was used repeatedly throughout the early post-Soviet period.

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neighbors, and the West. There is a great deal at stake in how we understand this conflict, but prevailing understandings are deeply at odds with one another: one school sees the conflict as being caused by Russian revanchism; another attributes it to Putin's need to bolster his autocratic rule; and another blames western expansionism and Ukrainian nationalism. The first two views point to a western strategy of waiting for Putin to leave the scene, while containing Russia in the meantime. The third points to accommodating Russia's claimed security needs by acquiescing to its desire to control Ukraine.

This book will show why neither of those strategies is likely to work in the short term. The roots of the conflict are deeper than is commonly understood and therefore will resist a simple change in policy or leadership. War between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West, was the result of deep "tectonic" forces as well as short-term triggers. Conflict between Ukraine and Russia is based on structural factors inherent to international politics as well as profound normative disagreements. While we can blame leaders for many of the decisions they have made, their mistakes did not cause the underlying conflicts, which were evident even in the 1990s, when post-Cold War mutual trust was at its highest.

Therefore, simply waiting for Putin to depart the stage in Russia, or for a more accommodating policy from the European Union or the United States, will not bring reconciliation. A return to peace and security would require agreement on a new architecture for security in Europe. Such an architecture could not be negotiated even when the Cold War ended and Russia was democratizing. With an increasingly autocratic Russia, deep East–West antagonism, and a brutal war over Ukraine, a new security architecture is even less attainable now than it was a few years ago. Only profound changes, such as a new democratization in Russia or an abandonment of the post-Word War II norms of the West, will improve prospects. The border between Russia and Ukraine, and by extension between free and unfree Europe, will be determined on the battlefield. Even when the current war ends, confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West, will remain. Whether anyone likes it or not, Ukraine and the West are destined to be in conflict with Russia for many years to come.

This book has two connected goals. The first is to explain how and why this conflict came about. The second is to provide an account of the relationship between Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the United States from the end of the Cold War in 1989 until the war of 2022. The chronology is a goal in its own right, for no such overview of Ukraine–Russia relations exists. It is also essential for understanding the conflict, since

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one of the primary contentions of this book is that the problems that led to war in 2014 and 2022 emerged at the beginning of the post-Cold War period and became increasingly salient over time. The decisions to go to war in 2014 and again in 2022 rested with Vladimir Putin, but the underlying causes of conflict were much deeper. This book focuses on the underlying causes, not because they made the war inevitable, but because they show why Putin and the Russian leadership found that they could not achieve their goals without war.

Competing Visions and Interests after the Cold War

To boil down the argument to its simplest version: the end of the Cold War set in motion two forces that were necessarily in tension: democratization in eastern Europe and Russia's quest to regain its "great power" status and its domination over its neighborhood. Ukraine was the place where democracy and independence most challenged Russia's conception of its national interests. It was not inevitable that this conflict would lead to violence, but neither was it likely to resolve itself.[2]

While Russia was determined to remain a great power and a regional hegemon, Ukraine was committed to independence. Even those Ukrainian leaders who pursued close economic ties with Russia staunchly defended Ukraine's sovereignty. As long as Russia's definition of its great power status included controlling Ukraine, Russia and Ukraine would be at odds. That was true in 1991 and has not changed fundamentally since.

Two broader dynamics – one a traditional problem in international politics, the other new to the post-Cold War era – connected the Russia–Ukraine conflict to broader European affairs in ways that made both harder to deal with. First, the security dilemma, an enduring problem in international relations, meant that the steps that each state took to protect its security were inevitably seen as threatening by others, spurring a cycle of action and reaction. Russia's "peacekeeping" in Moldova and Georgia was one example. The eastward enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was another.

Second, the spread of democracy fed the security dilemma, making states in the West feel more secure but undermining Russia's perceived national interest. Because they believed in the importance of democracy, and because they believed that democracy strengthened security, western leaders promoted the extension of democracy and the institutions

[2] On conflicts of interest between Russia and the West, see William C. Wohlforth and Vladislav Zubok, "An Abiding Antagonism: Realism, Idealism, and the Mirage of Western–Russian Partnership after the Cold War," *International Politics* 54, 4 (2017): 405–419.

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that supported it. While Russia did not appear to oppose democracy itself, it felt threatened as new democracies sought to join the principal institutions of European democracy, NATO and the European Union. The further this process went, the more resentful Russia became, and Ukraine was more important to Russia's perception of its interests, to its national identity, and to Putin's regime, than any other state. Fyodor Lukyanov wrote that "[I]n their [Russians'] view, Russia's subordinate position is the illegitimate result of a never-ending U.S. campaign to keep Russia down and prevent it from regaining its proper status."[3]

This merger of democracy and geopolitics was new, but it had an effect that looked familiar. To the extent that Russia turned away from liberal democracy while Europe embraced it, it was inevitable that there would be some border between democratic and nondemocratic Europe. In an earlier era, this had been called the "iron curtain." Would a new dividing line be Russia's border with Ukraine, Ukraine's border with Poland, or somewhere else? Could a zone of neutrals provide a "buffer" between Europe's democratic and nondemocratic regions? Perhaps, but no one wanted to be in that zone, and the idea of it clashed with European norms. A new division of Europe could be avoided only if Russia consolidated democracy and gave up its great power aspirations. The first of these failed and the second was rejected. It has been Ukraine's bad luck to have the conflict played out on its territory, as has so often been the case throughout history.

Debating the Causes of the War

Since the outbreak of conflict in 2014, a great deal of literature has emerged on it, which has three defining characteristics. First, much of it focuses on assigning blame. Second, much of it focuses on events beginning in 2013, and examines earlier developments only selectively. Third, it tends to focus either on the international or domestic sources of behavior, rather than investigating how they interact.

While much of the work published in the West takes it for granted that Russia is responsible for the conflict, a strident minority takes a position, closer to that of the Russian government, that the West and Ukraine forced Russia into a corner where it had no choice but to act.[4]

[3] Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95, 3 (May/June 2016): 30–37.

[4] The tendency to focus on blame is discussed in Paul D'Anieri, "Ukraine, Russia, and the West: The Battle over Blame," *The Russian Review* 75 (July 2016): 498–503. For other reviews of the literature, see Peter Rutland, "Geopolitics and the Roots of Putin's

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While assigning blame is irresistible, work that focuses on prosecuting one side or another tends to choose facts and assemble them selectively in ways that are at best one-sided and at worst misleading. Even excellent scholars have resorted to simplistic renderings of blame: John Mearsheimer stated that "the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," while Andrew Wilson wrote that "the Russians went ape."[5]

Assigning blame leads us to attribute considerable freedom of choice to leaders, minimizing the constraints they faced. Even those works that are more balanced in assigning blame tend to stress the ability of leaders to shape events and to underestimate the international and domestic political constraints on their policy choices. Some authors criticize the West for what it did, others for not doing more,[6] the common assumption being that leaders had a great deal of latitude to choose. Examination of the debates at the time makes clear that leaders frequently did not see the situation that way themselves. Policy makers often felt tightly constrained. The explanation developed here explores those constraints, which include the security dilemma, the impact of democratization, and domestic politics.

Second, much of the scholarship on the conflict has been incomplete temporally. Much of it has focused, quite reasonably, either on the

Foreign Policy," *Russian History* 43, 3–4 (2016): 425–436 and Michael E. Aleprete, Jr., "Minimizing Loss: Explaining Russian Policy: Choices during the Ukrainian Crisis," *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 44 (2017): 53–75. Among those blaming the West and Ukrainian nationalists are two very prominent scholars of Russian politics, Richard Sakwa and Stephen Cohen, and two prominent scholars of international security, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, as well as the scholar of Russian foreign policy Andrei Tsygankov. See Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); Katrina Vanden Heuvel and Stephen F. Cohen, "Cold War against Russia – Without Debate," *The Nation*, May 19, 2014; John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89; Stephen M. Walt, "What Would a Realist World Have Looked Like," *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 8, 2016; and Andrei Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, 4 (2015): 279–303. For those who put the blame on Russia, see Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Taras Kuzio, *Putin's War against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (Toronto: Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto); Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); and Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), especially chapter 23. For a work that assigns blame more evenly, see Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[5] Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," 1; Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, vii.

[6] See Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, "Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, 2 (2015): 167–187.

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period from November 2013 through spring 2014 or the outbreak of war in 2022 (about which scholarship is just beginning to emerge). Daniel Treisman zeroed in on Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Crimea, identifying four schools of thought: "Putin the defender," responding to the potential for Ukraine to join NATO; "Putin the imperialist," seizing Crimea as part of a broader project to recreate the Soviet Union; "Putin the populist," using the annexation of Crimea to build public support in the face of economic decline; and "Putin the improviser," seizing a fantastic opportunity.[7] Exploring that decision is crucial, but it does not explain how we got to that point, or why Putin then pursued a much wider conflict in 2022.

The conflict of 2014 was not caused simply by the overthrow of the Yanukovych government any more than World War I was caused only by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. In both cases, deep mutual fears that the status quo in eastern Europe might change irreversibly prompted leaders to be more risk acceptant than they normally would be (the crucial difference was that in 2014, unlike in 1914, the other European powers did not rush to join the war). Similarly, the much larger war of 2022 was not caused by the crisis that emerged in late 2021, or even by events since 2014, but by dynamics that emerged when the Cold War ended.

Because the long-term antecedents of the invasion are crucial to our overall understanding of the conflict, this book chronicles the evolution of Ukrainian–Russian relations since 1991, showing that while violence was never inevitable, conflict over Ukraine's status emerged prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union and never receded. Similarly, while the collapse of communism ended the Cold War, it did not create a shared understanding of Russia's role relative to the West in post-Cold War Europe. While it seemed reasonable to believe that these disagreements would be resolved over time, the opposite happened, and we need to understand the forces that widened differences rather than narrowing them.

Third, the complexity of the relationships involved has been neglected, because it is difficult to focus at the same time on internal affairs in Ukraine and Russia, on their relationship with each other, and their relationships with the West. However, doing so is essential, because by

[7] Daniel Treisman, *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2018), chapter 11. Treisman finds problems with all four explanations, and ends up arguing that the primary goal was preventing the loss of the naval base at Sevastopol. He points out that while the military part of the operation seemed well prepared and ran very smoothly, the political arrangements, including who would be in charge in Crimea and whether Crimea would seek autonomy or to join Russia, seemed chaotic and improvised.

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the time of the Orange Revolution in 2004, Ukraine's domestic battle between pluralism and authoritarianism was tightly connected both to its battle for greater autonomy from Russia and to Russia's burgeoning conflict with the West. This conflict is neither simply a domestic Ukrainian conflict that became internationalized nor a great power conflict fought over Ukraine. It is first and foremost a conflict between Ukraine and Russia, but is connected to domestic politics in both countries and to both countries' relationships with Europe and the US.

Locating the Sources of International Conflict

Few of the existing works make use of the large literature on international conflict. Using that literature, we can reframe the question in terms of where we look for sources.[8] One set of works locates its explanation inside of the Russian government, in the nature of the Putin regime itself. A common argument is that Putin's need to bolster his autocracy was a driving force in the decision to go to war. In this view, Putin has a great deal of agency.[9]

Two other schools of thought see Russia responding to external rather than internal factors. One of these sees Russia as seeking expansion, but for international rather than domestic reasons. Another sees Russia as reacting against western expansion. While these approaches put the blame on different actors, they both fit into the school known as "defensive realism," which posits that states can usually manage the challenges inherent in the anarchic international system, absent an aggressive "rogue state." The assumption that conflict depends on aggression leads these authors to identify one side or the other as taking actions to undermine the region's security.[10]

The school of "offensive realism" is more pessimistic, in that it sees the international system as bringing even nonaggressive states into conflict, as states that seek only security unintentionally cause security threats to others. In this view, one does not need to identify an aggressor to explain conflict. This book takes that perspective seriously. Russia chose to attack Ukraine, both in 2014 and in 2022, but it did not do so in a

[8] This categorization follows loosely that of Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51 (October 1998): 144–172.

[9] Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, and Stoner and McFaul, "Who Lost Russia," share this perspective. A deeper discussion of this perspective is in Chapter 9.

[10] Not all the authors who advance these arguments have always been identified with defensive realism. Mearsheimer's extensive scholarship generally falls into the school of "offensive" realism, but his argument that the misguided West provoked the war in Ukraine is consistent with "defensive" realism.

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vacuum. While Russia, Ukraine, and the West can all be criticized for the policies they chose, there were, I contend, dynamics in post-Cold War Europe that resisted resolution. While Russia was at fault for resorting to force, it is important to recognize that it perceived security challenges that caused considerable concern. One does not need to see Russia's desire to control Ukraine as a "legitimate interest," as some authors do, to acknowledge that Russia considered the loss of Ukraine to be intolerable. Similarly, even if one considers NATO enlargement to have been a mistake, it was a response to a security problem that did not have another easy solution.

The focus on international and domestic sources need not be mutually exclusive. It seems likely that invading Ukraine advanced both international and domestic goals for Putin and may have been especially attractive because it did. Therefore, this book seeks to analyze how international and domestic factors interacted. Among the key themes are the way that the state of democracy in Ukraine interacted with its international orientation, and the fact that the Ukrainian state was always weak, and then nearly collapsed in 2014. The Russian state, after going through a period of decay in the 1990s, gradually strengthened such that by 2014 it could deploy a highly effective "hybrid" war in Ukraine and by 2022 it could launch a massive invasion.

Overall, then, the approach here is consistent with the school of thought known as "neoclassical realism," which finds that the security dilemma conditions international politics, but that internal factors influence how states respond to it. This approach differs from prevailing interpretations by acknowledging that the various leaders saw themselves as being constrained by both international factors and domestic politics, such that they had less freedom of maneuver than many analyses have attributed to them. We should be more cautious in charging aggression or stupidity. In order to understand these constraints, we need to examine both the security dilemma that existed in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the domestic politics of the various countries involved, especially Ukraine. In particular, we need to understand the ways in which democratization became merged with geopolitics, repeatedly disrupting the status quo and putting a core value of the West at odds with Russia's sense of its security.

The Approach: Historical and Analytical

This book combines historical and social science approaches. The questions of what happened and why are tightly linked. Therefore, we combine a chronological narrative with a set of social science concepts that

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help reveal the dynamics and patterns that connect events over more than thirty years. The book is not, strictly speaking, a work of history, as it is not based primarily on archival sources. But considerable attention is given to describing what happened, and to looking at how the actors at the time explained what they were doing. Their views are gleaned from the statements they made at the time, as well as later accounts and interviews conducted in Ukraine.

The narrative account, which traces the evolution of Ukraine–Russia and Russia–West relations since 1989, is structured by a set of analytical themes that identify the underlying dynamics of the conflict, and that show the connections between this case and broader patterns in world politics. This approach requires a theoretical eclecticism that brings multiple theories to bear on the problem rather than insisting on fitting the complexities of the case into a single perspective.[11]

Analytical Themes

The conflict that turned violent in 2014 and escalated in 2022 was rooted in deep disagreements about what the post-Cold War world should look like. Those differences emerged with the end of the Cold War and have endured. They constitute each side's perception of what the status quo was or should be. Actors were willing to take heightened risks when it appeared their conception of the status quo was under threat. Three dynamics explain why those conflicts of interest could not be mitigated despite the presumably benign environment after the end of the Cold War. First, the security dilemma, a common phenomenon in international politics, meant that actions that each state took to preserve its security created problems for others and induced fears about actors' intentions. Second, the spread of democracy complicated matters considerably. Because new democracies sought to join Europe's democratic international institutions, the European Union and NATO, democratization took on geopolitical consequences that the West saw as benign and that Russia saw as threatening. With Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution the merger of democratization and geopolitics became nearly complete. Moreover, the progress – and the backsliding – of democratization in the region meant that the status quo was repeatedly disrupted, raising new fears and new conflicts. Third, regardless of the level of democracy in the various states, domestic politics repeatedly undermined cooperation

[11] Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms across Research Traditions," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, 2 (2010): 411–431.

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and concessions. In the United States, in Russia, and in Ukraine there was almost always more to lose and less to gain domestically from taking a conciliatory policy than from taking a harder line. Moreover, the fact that Russia rebuilt a strong state after 2000, while Ukraine's remained weak and divided, made it increasingly possible for Russia to see a military solution as viable.

In sum, while the end of the Cold War resolved some questions, it created several more, including the status of Russia and Ukraine in relation to each other and to Europe more generally. Traditional security challenges such as the security dilemma remained, and a new one – the merger of democratization with geopolitics – emerged. Oddly, the end of the Cold War did not make conciliatory policies popular with voters or elites in the United States, Ukraine, or Russia. Taken together, the recipe was corrosive: conflicts of interest were reinforced and where strong, skilled leadership might have reduced conflict, leaders repeatedly faced countervailing domestic pressures.

These dynamics have been largely ignored in accounts of relations between Ukraine, Russia, and the West, but if we take them seriously, we need to look much less hard for someone to blame for the fact that Russia's goals collided with those of Ukraine and the West. The actors were impelled to step on each other's toes whether they wanted to or not. This did not make war inevitable or justifiable, but it did guarantee a certain amount of friction, and it meant that unusual leadership would be required to manage the conflicts of interest and hard feelings that resulted.

Competing Goals and Incompatible Perceptions of the Status Quo

As the Cold War ended in 1989–1991, leaders in Russia, Europe, and the United States perceived a dramatic reduction in tension and an increasing harmony of interests and values. But Russia and Ukraine held vastly different expectations about whether their relationship would be based on sovereign equality or on traditional Russian hegemony. Similarly, while the West believed that the end of the Cold War meant that Russia was becoming a "normal" European country, Russia strongly believed that it would retain its traditional role as a great power, with privileges like a sphere of influence and a veto over security arrangements.

The actors had very different understandings of what the status quo was, and therefore which changes were "legitimate" or "illegitimate," which were benign or harmful, and which were signs of bad faith or aggressive intent on the part of others. While most Russians welcomed the end of

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communism and the end of the Cold War, they did not accept the loss of Ukraine. In 1992, Joseph Brodsky, the Russian émigré poet, Nobel Prize winner and, at the time, the Poet Laureate of the US, performed a poem bitterly condemning Ukrainian independence and disparaging Ukrainians.[12] In the 1990s, even one of the leading liberals in Russia, Boris Nemtsov, advocated regaining Sevastopol by having Russian firms buy assets there: "Historical justice should be restored through capitalist methods."[13] In Nemtsov's view, increasing Russian control of Crimea would be a *restoration*, not a new gain for Russia. In 2014, Alexei Navalny, who became Russia's leading pro-democracy political prisoner, said "I don't see any difference at all between Russians and Ukrainians."[14]

Russia's inability to reconcile itself to the loss of Ukraine is unsurprising. The belief that Ukraine is part of Russia is rooted in a Russian foundation myth which sees the origins of today's Russia in medieval Kyiv, in the hundreds of years in which much of Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, and in the important role played by people from Ukraine – the writers Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Bulgakov, the revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev among many others – in Russian/Soviet culture and politics. The sense of something important being lost was profound.[15] Vladimir Putin invoked this history to justify the seizure of Crimea in 2014.[16] Gerard Toal applies the concept of "thick geopolitics" and Elizabeth Wood refers to "imagined geography" to show how Russia's perception of its geopolitical situation shaped Russian policy in its "near abroad."[17]

[12] Joseph Brodsky, "Na nezavisimost' Ukrainy" (1992), www.culture.ru/poems/30468/na-nezavisimost-ukrainy. For a discussion, see Keith Gessen, "A Note on Brodsky and Ukraine," *The New Yorker*, August 21, 2011.

[13] OMRI Daily Digest Part I, February 19, 1997, as cited in Paul D'Anieri, *Economic Interdependence in Ukrainian–Russian Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 211.

[14] Anna Dolgov, "Navalny Wouldn't Return Crimea, Considers Immigration Bigger Issue than Ukraine," *Moscow Times*, October 16, 2014. See also Marlene Laruelle, "Alexei Navalny and Challenges in Reconciling 'Nationalism' and 'Liberalism'," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, 4 (2014): 276–297.

[15] See Peter J. Potichnyj, Marc Raeff, Jaroslaw Pelenski, and Gleb N. Zekulin., eds., *Ukraine and Russia in Their Historical Encounter* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1982).

[16] "Address by President of the Russian Federation," March 18, 2014, President of Russia website.

[17] Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Toal deliberately takes an "empathetic" approach to understanding Russia's perception of its role in the region. Elizabeth A. Wood, "Introduction," in Elizabeth A. Wood, William E. Pomeranz, E. Wayne Merry, and Maxim Trudolyubov, *Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016), pp. 3–6.

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"Status quo bias," or "loss aversion," the study of which earned Daniel Kahneman a Nobel Prize, is a phenomenon widely studied in psychology and behavioral economics. As Kahneman and Amos Tversky put it succinctly, "losses loom larger than gains."[18] Actors are willing to take disproportionate risks to avoid a perceived loss. Applied to international relations, states will try very hard to preserve the status quo or to restore it when they perceive it has been disrupted for the worse. Henry Kissinger, relying on history rather than behavioral economics, similarly argued that whether great powers accepted the status quo was crucial to the maintenance of stability.[19] After 1991, Ukraine, Russia, and the West had different understandings of the new status quo. Therefore, each saw itself as defending the status quo, and saw others' efforts to overturn it as signs of malicious intent.

It is tempting to see Russia's determination to control Ukraine as the only explanation needed for this war. Absent this factor, it is hard to see how the conflict emerges, let alone results in war. However, such a view is incomplete, because it fails to account for Ukraine's resistance to Russia's goals, for the West's increasing interest in supporting Ukraine's independence, and for the merger of Russia's conflict with Ukraine into a much larger conflict between Russia and the West. It is a truism that war takes at least two parties: If one side capitulates, there is no need for war. Focusing only on Russian aggression ignores Ukraine's agency, which not only was central in the demise of the Soviet Union but also meant that Russia's strategy of peaceful coercion could not work. Without Ukraine's determination to remain separate, Ukraine's independence after 1991 might have been fleeting, as it was after World War I. Without the West's willingness to support Ukraine, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine would likely have turned out very differently.

While Ukraine and the West saw Russia trying to overturn the post-Cold War status quo, Russia saw the West trying to overturn it by expanding NATO eastward and by promoting "colored revolutions" against governments that Russia supported. In 2005, Andrei Zagorsky lamented that "Russia acts as a status quo power that is no longer

[18] Daniel S. Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, 2 (March 1979): 279. On the application of prospect theory to international politics, see Jack S. Levy, "Prospect Theory and International Relations: Theoretical Approaches and Analytical Problems," *Political Psychology* 13, 2 (1992): 283–310; and Jonathan Mercer, "Prospect Theory and Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005): 1–21.

[19] Kissinger divided great powers into "status quo" powers, which were satisfied with the status quo and defended it, and revolutionary powers, which were dissatisfied with the status quo and sought to overturn it. See Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812–22* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

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able to prevent or resist the rise of change."[20] Kahneman and Tversky stressed that this sense of having lost something is especially dangerous: "[A] person who has not made peace with his losses is likely to accept gambles that would be unacceptable to him otherwise."[21] As Kissinger argued, in a situation where the status quo is not mutually agreed upon, states see each other as acting in bad faith, as unreasonable, and as subverting the established order.[22] That increasingly characterized diplomacy over Ukraine.[23]

The Security Dilemma

The underlying dynamics of international politics were stubborn, and the measures that each state took to improve its security naturally looked threatening to others, even if they were not intended that way. The result was a self-reinforcing cycle. With Russia making claims on Ukrainian territory, Ukraine considered keeping nuclear weapons on its territory. This was seen as threatening not only by Russia, but by the United States. Similarly, central European states, after decades of occupation, sought to join NATO, which Russia feared. Russia's own actions reinforced the belief that it might again become a threat to its neighbors, and so on. In a letter to voters before his first election as president in 2000, Vladimir Putin stated: "It is unreasonable to fear a strong Russia, but she must be reckoned with. To offend us would cost anyone dearly."[24] Many of Russia's neighbors, based on recent history, felt that there was a lot to fear from a strong Russia, and the statement that offending Russia "would cost anyone dearly" was likely read as a threat against which precautions would be advisable.

To scholars of international politics, this vicious circle, known as the "security dilemma," recurs throughout history, and is hard or even impossible to escape.[25] In this view, even peaceful states, as they

[20] Andrei Zagorski, "Russia and the Shared Neighborhood," in Dov Lynch, ed., *What Russia Sees*, Chaillot Paper No. 74, Institute for Security Studies, January 2005, p. 69.

[21] Kahneman and Tversky, "Prospect Theory," p. 287. Levy ("Prospect Theory and International Relations," p. 286) applies this point to international politics: "A state which perceives itself to be in a deteriorating situation might be willing to take excessively risky actions in order to maintain the status quo."

[22] Kissinger, *A World Restored*, p. 2.

[23] The theory of loss aversion is applied specifically to the conflicts in Crimea and eastern Ukraine by Aleprete, "Minimizing Loss."

[24] "Putin's Foreign Policy Riddle," BBC News Online, March 28, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/693526.stm.

[25] There is an enormous literature on the security dilemma, its consequences, and the potential to resolve it. For a good short treatment, see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, 2 (January 1978): 167–214.

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pursue security, unintentionally create threats to others. Some recognized that the end of the Cold War did not solve this problem. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, John Mearsheimer predicted that if the United States withdrew from Europe, security fears would prompt Germany to acquire nuclear weapons.[26] That prediction was one reason why the United States did not depart and why NATO did not disband, but many worried that it was unclear where NATO expansion would stop or how far it could go "before the West more or less permanently alienates Russia."[27] The essence of the security dilemma is that either pursuing new security measures or not doing so can leave one feeling vulnerable. In this perspective it is the situation, or the system, which is to blame, not the individual actors, who find themselves trapped in this dynamic.

Escaping the security dilemma would have required one side or the other – or both – to abandon its understanding of what was acceptable as the status quo after the Cold War. Either the West and Ukraine would have to give up on the idea that in the new Europe democracy was the norm and democratic institutions were free to grow, or Russia would have to give up on its claims over Ukraine. Along the way, both sides had the opportunity to make smaller concessions. Whether one places the blame for the eventual conflict on Russia, Ukraine, or the West depends largely on which state one thinks should have revised its expectations, and by extension on whose vision for post-Cold War Europe was more just.

Democracy and Power Politics

The end of the Cold War represented a massive geopolitical shift driven by mostly peaceful democratic revolutions in eastern Europe. Leaders in the West learned that democratization – something that people in the West fervently believed in – also brought important security gains. However, democratization repeatedly undid the status quo, each time with geopolitical consequences that Russia feared. Initially, new democracies sought to join NATO. Then "colored revolutions" overturned pro-Russian governments in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine. "The emergence of the European Union as an economic superpower harnessed to a NATO alliance and steadily marching eastward confronted the new Russia with a prospect that has in the past represented the ultimate security

[26] John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, 1 (Summer 1990): 5–56.
[27] Robert J. Art, "Creating a Disaster: NATO's Open Door Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 113, 3 (1998): 383.

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nightmare – a frontier with a unified European 'empire.'"[28] Moreover, as Russia focused on the development of a strong state at the expense of liberal democracy, a new ideological divide opened between it and the West.[29] Democracy came to be seen in Russia as an anti-Russian weapon, with the ultimate target being the Putin government. When Russia pushed back against the democratic revolutions of its neighbors, it was seen as aggressively interfering in their affairs. As a result, the West seemed like a "revisionist power" to Russia even as Russia seemed revisionist to the West.

This notion that democracy promoted security was bolstered by academic research on the "democratic peace theory," which held that war between democracies was impossible, and therefore that the spread of democracy would create an expanding region in which war was no longer possible. The theory had received enormous academic attention from the 1980s onward among western academics. The North Atlantic community looked like the kind of zone of peace envisioned by Kant and others, and many hoped that democracy and its security benefits could spread quickly and unproblematically to the postcommunist states.[30]

One of the political virtues of democratization as a foreign policy was that it resolved the traditional tension between doing good and pursuing one's interests, a tension felt particularly strongly in the United States during the Cold War. Rather than supporting dictators who were on the West's side against communism, the democratic peace held out the hope that by promoting democracy, the West could do good and increase international security at the same time.

Democracy promotion appealed to realists as much as to liberals. For realists, the geopolitical impact of democratization in Europe was the creation of a set of free states that would prevent the reassertion of a Russian Empire. Former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, argued that the West should promote "geopolitical pluralism" in the former Soviet Union. The democratic peace moved from theory to practice in part because it overlapped so neatly with a policy designed to expand the West's influence and check Russian reassertion.[31]

[28] Alfred J. Rieber, "How Persistent Are Persistent Factors?" in Robert Legvold, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 212.

[29] Maxime Henri André Larivé and Roger E. Kanet, "The Return to Europe and the Rise of EU–Russian Ideological Differences," *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 14, 1 (Winter/Spring 2013): 125–138.

[30] For a summary and critique of this perspective, see Philip G. Roeder, "Peoples and States after 1989: The Political Costs of Incomplete National Revolutions," *Slavic Review* 58, 4 (Winter 1999): 854–882.

[31] This aspect of US foreign policy is critiqued by Toal, *Near Abroad*, pp. 10–12 and 291–297.

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Thus, the expansion of western institutions into eastern Europe did not occur because liberalism triumphed over realism or because democrats outvoted republicans, but because it was supported by both realists and liberals, and by both republicans and democrats.[32] Liberals sought to promote democracy and international institutions, while realists sought to keep Russia from reestablishing control over central Europe. Not only Bill Clinton, Anthony Lake, and Strobe Talbott supported NATO enlargement, but also Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, and Richard Nixon. The dissent was limited to a small number of critics, such as George Kennan, who feared the impact on Russia (Kennan had also opposed the founding of NATO in 1949).

For Russia, however, the geopolitical implications of democratization were threatening, and the biggest threat was in Ukraine. Given the opportunity, the people of eastern Europe would choose democracy and western Europe. If Russia did not join them, it would be isolated. To the extent that democracy in Russia was questionable – and it was never *not* questionable – Russia's neighbors faced a threat and a choice. They would almost certainly align with the democratic West, not an autocratic Russia. That threatened Russia's conception of its security and its identity as a "great power." Moreover, the keystone of geopolitical pluralism was a strong independent Ukraine, something most Russians strongly opposed. Western leaders downplayed Russian objections to the geopolitical implications of democratization because, according to the democratic peace argument and given the end of the Cold War, such implications seemed irrelevant.

Russia explicitly rejected the notion of geopolitical pluralism in its neighborhood. Russia considered its domination of the post-Soviet region, including Ukraine, to be both essential to Russian interests and to benefit the entire region. Some states in the region (especially Belarus and Kazakhstan) accepted the inevitability of Russian leadership and even welcomed it. Others (Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan) opposed Russia's claims to primacy. If these states were democratic, they were going to reject Russian control.

The United States and western European countries encouraged the overthrow of Europe's remaining authoritarian regimes. The ouster of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia's "Bulldozer Revolution" in October 2000 showed what was possible: A popular revolution ejected an autocratic leader, solving an intractable security problem. For the EU, a less violent

[32] On the tendency of transnational liberalism to bolster US dominance, see John M. Owen IV, "Transnational Liberalism and U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 26, 3 (Winter 2001–2002): 117–152.

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but equally important case was that of Slovakia, where the European Union made it clear that progress on EU membership would be slowed as long as the autocratic government of Vladimir Meciar remained in power. Slovak elites isolated Meciar and forced him from power in order to preserve the country's goal of European integration.[33] Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution and Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution contributed to the belief that there was a "recipe" that could be replicated elsewhere.[34] The initial success of the revolutions of the "Arab Spring" in 2011 appeared to further demonstrate the power of contagion to bring democracy to long-time autocracies and to eliminate major security problems. Russia saw this practice as illegitimate and dangerous. The revolution in Serbia replaced a government that Russia had supported with one much more friendly to the West. The Rose Revolution in Georgia was more complicated, but the new Saakashvili government was strongly pro-United States and anti-Russian. The Orange Revolution was more threatening still, both because Ukraine was much more important to Russia and because the Orange Revolution was seen by many as a potential model to oust Putin himself. Some in the West openly hoped for a colored revolution in Russia.

After the colored revolutions, democracy promotion in general and democratic revolution in particular were so intertwined with geopolitical competition that they could not be separated. For the West, democracy promotion became not just the pursuit of an ideal, but a powerful weapon in the contest for influence in an increasingly chaotic world. For Russia, democracy promotion appeared to be a new form of warfare, capturing territory by replacing its leaders via protests, rather than by invading with armies. Moreover, it was a weapon that increasingly appeared to be aimed at the Putin regime in Russia. This was the context when protests forced President Viktor Yanukovych from power in early 2014.

Domestic Constraints and State Strength

While international factors played an important role in fostering conflict, the spark in 2014 was provided by Ukraine's internal politics. After being fairly elected president in 2010, Viktor Yanukovych sought to fundamentally reorder politics in the country in ways that many of its

[33] See Kevin Deegan-Krause, "Slovakia's Second Transition," *Journal of Democracy* 14, 2 (2003): 65–79.

[34] It is notable that one of the leading analysts of the colored revolutions, Michael McFaul, was named US Ambassador to Russia in 2011, much to the annoyance of the Putin government.

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citizens and elites would not accept. These efforts, and the perception that the window to preserve democracy in Ukraine was closing quickly, turned a protest over integration policy into an effort to eject Yanukovych from power. More generally, international factors interacted with internal forces within Russia, Ukraine, and other key states in ways that undermined cooperation, and this has been underemphasized in most analyses of the conflict.

Throughout its independence period, Ukraine maintained three types of balance internally. The first was between the regions of the country. Ukraine's regional diversity was a challenge for leaders, but made it much more difficult for anyone to consolidate autocratic power, as happened in most of the post-Soviet region. Second was the foreign policy balance between Russia and the West. As long as Ukraine could credibly claim to be building ties with both the West and Russia, advocates of both policies could feel at least minimally satisfied. Third, and most important, was the pluralism that existed among the country's oligarchic groups or "clans." "Oligarchs" in this context refers not merely to billionaires, but to individuals at the top of large patronage-based organizations ("clans") whose involvement in commerce, politics, corruption (and in some cases organized crime) reinforces one another. Oligarchic pluralism did not make Ukraine democratic, but it kept it from becoming fully autocratic,[35] and the oligarchs defended that pluralism whenever anyone sought to establish political–economic dominance in the country. That explains why powerful oligarchs supported both the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the "Revolution of Dignity" of 2013–2014.

After winning a close election in 2010, Yanukovych sought to permanently eliminate competition for power. Having taken control of the country's Constitutional Court, he was able to get it to invalidate the crucial "pact" limiting presidential power that had resolved the crisis during the Orange Revolution. He then used other illegal means to forge a majority in the parliament. All this pointed to autocracy. Perhaps more damaging, however, were his efforts to overturn the regional and oligarchic balances in the country, gathering power in a narrowing circle of oligarchs that came to be called the "family." Seizing an increasing share of the country's economy shrank the coalition of oligarchs that had a stake in his survival, and increased the number who would benefit from his departure. This created the same dynamic that had provoked the Orange Revolution, fostering the transition of protests about the European Union into an effort to overthrow his government.

[35] See Lucan Way, *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), especially chapter 3.

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With Yanukovych's ouster in 2014, Ukrainian democracy was restored, and Russia's seizure of Crimea and invasion of Donbas did nothing to undermine it. Ukraine held free and fair elections in 2014 and 2019, in stark contrast to the rigged elections in Russia. As a result of Russian occupation, far fewer pro-Russian voters were able to vote in Ukrainian elections, and many others became more hostile to Russia. It was becoming increasingly clear that the steps taken in 2014 had not disrupted Ukrainian democracy and had strengthened Ukraine's determination to shun Russia and join the West. The Minsk agreements, which had been imposed on Ukraine in 2014 and 2015, might have slowed Ukraine's drift westward, but for that reason Ukrainian leaders resisted implementing them, as least on the terms Russia demanded.

Two elements in Russian domestic politics are also crucial to the story: the erosion of democracy and the widespread belief that Russia should retain some sort of control over Ukraine. The erosion of democracy in Russia decreased the West's confidence that it could count on Russia as a partner. More important, an increasingly autocratic Russian government perceived an existential threat from the kind of democratic protest movement that emerged in Ukraine in 2004 and again in 2014.

The consensus in Russia that Ukraine was "really" part of Russia meant that there was always benefit to Russian politicians in making claims on Ukraine and risk in openly accepting its independence. In the 1990s, pressure from the "red–brown coalition" of leftists and nationalists forced Boris Yeltsin to take harder positions on various positions than he otherwise might have. It is unlikely that Putin would have ordered the annexation of Crimea if it had not been massively popular. This raises a point that has been underappreciated: as much as analysts have focused on the erosion of democracy in Russia as a source of conflict, a more democratic Russia may not have had a more benign attitude toward Ukraine.

The importance of domestic politics goes beyond Russia and Ukraine. For example, early in the post-Soviet period the United States and the West considered whether to support Russian reform with a new version of the Marshall Plan or with something less robust. In retrospect, there has been much criticism of the meager aid provided, based on the plausible but unconfirmable premise that significant aid would have changed the subsequent course of events in Russia. Why was the chance not taken? A new "Marshall Plan" was unsustainable politically in the United States. The United States was in recession in 1991–1992 and US leaders hoped to divert a "peace dividend" from foreign policy to domestic spending. With elections in November 1992, and Democrats hammering President George H. W. Bush for his handling of the economy,

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Bush felt that he could not push harder for a larger aid package to Russia, and it is almost certain that such a proposal would have stalled in the US Congress. When Bill Clinton entered the White House in 1993, and Russian reform was already on the ropes, he felt equally constrained. Clinton prioritized a domestic spending package to help the United States out of recession and was advised that he could not get both that and a large aid package for Russia through Congress.

Domestic politics helps explain why governments did not take steps that might have led to better outcomes, reminding us that while we lay blame at various leaders' feet, those leaders themselves felt that their options were tightly constrained. The United States did not initiate a new Marshall Plan because it was in a recession and an election year. Russia did not simply let Ukraine go its own way because most Russians felt Ukraine was an intrinsic part of Russia. Ukraine did not reduce its economic dependence on Russia because remedying it would have required unpopular reforms and because that economic dependence was the source of so much revenue for corrupt officials.

The contrast between the evolution of the Ukrainian and Russian states is particularly telling. Ukraine's independence in 1991 was enabled by the weakening and collapse of the Soviet state in Moscow. Beginning at that time, both Ukraine and Russia struggled to build new, post-Soviet states, though Russia at least had much of the Soviet apparatus to repurpose. Throughout the 1990s, both states struggled to establish their authority and to perform basic functions such as collecting taxes and enforcing the rule of law.[36] Both were deeply penetrated by powerful economic and political figures known as oligarchs. After 2000, however, their paths diverged. Ukraine continued to have a state that was weak, corrupt, and penetrated by oligarchs, and yet somehow remained pluralistic and largely democratic. In Russia, Vladimir Putin built a *vertikal* of power, brought the press under control, and curbed the independence of the oligarchs, all at the expense of democracy. While Russia invested in rebuilding a strong military with operational readiness, Ukraine shrank the enormous military it had inherited from the Soviet Union but struggled to reform it into a viable fighting force. Russia's domestic state strength corresponded with its international assertiveness. While

[36] For analyses of state strength in Russia, see Andrei P. Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia: Development and Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Stephen E. Hanson, "The Uncertain Future of Russia's Weak State Authoritarianism," *East European Politics and Societies* 21, 1 (2007): 67–81; Peter H. Solomon, Jr., "Vladimir Putin's Quest for a Strong State," *International Journal on World Peace* 22, 2 (June 2005): 3–12; and Thomas E. Graham, "The Sources of Russian Conduct," *The National Interest*, August 24, 2016.

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the desire to assert itself in its neighborhood was more or less constant after 1991, Russia's internal capacity to do so rose steadily after 2000. Between 2016 and 2021, Russia more than doubled the number of battalion tactical groups, the key operational unit in its army.[37] If we want to understand why war on the scale of 2022 did not occur sooner, part of the answer may be that Russia simply was not ready.

Proximate Causes

These factors – incompatible goals for the region and understandings of the status quo, exacerbated by the security dilemma, the merger of democratization with geopolitics, and the constraints of domestic politics – constitute the broad underlying sources of the conflict. The proximate and contingent factors need to be stressed as well, for despite those underlying sources of tension, violent conflict was never inevitable. Without events in 2013–2014 that were unpredictable and easily could have gone differently, Russia might not have seized Crimea and intervened in Donbas.

The 2022 escalation was preceded by no similar trigger and causes us to at least consider two other interpretations. First, it is possible that Russia was always determined to conquer Ukraine, and if it did not attack on the scale of 2022 sooner, that is because it was trying more incremental strategies while building its military. Second, it is possible that rather than understanding the attack of 2022 as the result of calculations of costs and benefits by Russian leaders, we should understand it as a decision of an increasingly erratic and irrational leader. We explore this issue in Chapter 9.

Overview of the Book

As Chapter 2 shows, the end of the Cold War left two problems for Russia, Ukraine, and the West. First, Russia did not accept Ukraine's independence. Second, there was no agreed security architecture for Europe to replace the division that had persisted from 1945 to 1991. Initially, the two problems were almost entirely separate, joined only in the general Russian insistence that Russia was and would continue to be a "great power."

From the moment of the Soviet collapse in August 1991, Russia sought to retain or recreate some kind of "center" to oversee military and economic policies among the post-Soviet states. Ukraine resisted, and

[37] Lester R. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, "Getting to Know the Russian Battalion Tactical Group," RUSI, April 22, 2022, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/getting-know-russian-battalion-tactical-group.

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between 1991 and 1994 Russia and Ukraine skirmished over the role of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the status of the Black Sea Fleet and its base in Sevastopol, and the disposition of the nuclear weapons on Ukrainian territory. The United States and Russia jointly pressured Ukraine to surrender any claim to nuclear weapons, which Ukraine finally agreed to do in January 1994. Meanwhile, Ukraine's economy collapsed, due in part to the decline that had begun under the Soviets, in part to the disintegration of the Soviet economy, and in part to Ukrainian leaders' resistance to reform.

United States–Russia relations were at their best in this period, but even so, problems emerged almost immediately. In Moscow, conservatives regrouped to resist economic reform and Russia's nascent partnership with the West. The Bush and Clinton administrations sought to support Boris Yeltsin but were wary of the growing influence of conservatives who saw the events of 1991 as a disaster. The violent dissolution of the Russian parliament in 1993 and the victory of new conservative parties in the subsequent parliamentary elections heightened the perceived threat from a reassertive Russia.

Chapter 3 documents an important repositioning of Ukraine, Russia, and the United States from 1994 to 1999. Ukraine's signing of the 1994 Trilateral Agreement surrendering its nuclear weapons removed the primary obstacle to US support at the same time that Russian revanchists made hedging the West's bets on Russia seem prudent. Leonid Kuchma, elected President of Ukraine in mid-1994, was from eastern Ukraine and supported trade with Russia, diffusing separatist sentiment in Crimea. But he was adamant that Ukraine would not compromise its sovereignty. Instead, he led Ukraine into extensive participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace. Already, Ukraine had come to be seen as a part of the West's strategic relationship with Russia. Despite ongoing tension, the high point of Ukraine–Russia relations came with the signing of a "Friendship Treaty" in 1997, in which Russia recognized Ukraine's borders, Ukraine agreed to lease Russia the naval base at Sevastopol in Crimea, and the Black Sea Fleet was finally divided. Ominously, many Russian politicians strongly opposed the treaty.

Despite the best efforts of Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, United States–Russian relations continued to fray. The United States provided rhetorical support and campaign advisors (and supported a new IMF loan) to help Boris Yeltsin win reelection in 1996, but that support, and the connected "loans for shares" scheme, was a source of later Russian resentment. In 1998, the spread of the Asian financial crisis to Russia caused havoc, further convincing Russians that western advice was undermining their economy.

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Meanwhile, the war in Yugoslavia had a deeply corrosive impact on Russia's relations with the West. Clinton committed himself to supporting NATO enlargement in 1994, and the war in Yugoslavia helped ensure that it actually happened, first by making it clear that the end of the Cold War was not going to eliminate security problems in Europe, second by undermining the notion that Russia could be counted on to help solve these problems, and third by showing that only NATO, with its unified military command and without a Russian veto, could address the biggest threats to peace. For both domestic and international reasons, Boris Yeltsin felt he had to support Serbia in 1994–1995 and again in 1999, forcing the West to choose between honoring Russia's wishes and keeping its promise never again to stand by during a genocide in Europe.

Chapter 4 begins with the momentous year 1999. In March, NATO officially admitted three new members, and two weeks later the alliance began bombing Serbia. In November, Leonid Kuchma was reelected President of Ukraine, accelerating a trend toward autocracy that ended in the 2004 Orange Revolution. And on the final day of the year, Boris Yeltsin resigned, installing Vladimir Putin as acting president and putting him in position to win the permanent job a few months later. After the terrorist attacks in September 2001, Russia and the United States found common cause in combating terrorism, but by 2003 Russia opposed the Bush administration's defining foreign policy, the war to oust Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Kuchma's efforts to consolidate power and eliminate competition initially looked likely to succeed, but the murder of the journalist Georgiy Gongadze, and recordings implicating Kuchma in that and other misdeeds, spurred opposition. The West kept him at arm's length, and he responded by seeking closer ties with Russia, where Vladimir Putin was more successfully eliminating political competition.

In the 2004 Ukraine presidential election, Russia saw the opportunity to finally get a leader in Kyiv who would support integration with Russia. Putin supported Viktor Yanukovych personally and with the resources of the Russian government and media. The protests and subsequent agreement to rerun the rigged election turned a Russian victory into a stinging defeat. This episode, more than any other, merged Ukrainian–Russian relations into Russia's relations with the West.

Chapter 5 examines the period following the Orange Revolution under President Viktor Yushchenko. The Orange Revolution promised domestic reform and integration with Europe, but neither occurred, and corruption persisted unabated. The "orange coalition" dissolved into bitter conflict, undermining reform. Viktor Yushchenko despised his former ally Yuliya Tymoshenko so intensely that he supported Viktor

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Yanukovych – who had tried to steal the 2004 election – to become prime minister in 2006 and to become president in 2010.

NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit put Ukraine at the center of growing tension between Russia and the West. The United States supported giving Ukraine and Georgia "Membership Action Plans" to join NATO. Germany and France, striving not to alienate Russia, blocked the proposal. While the non-binding statement that Ukraine and Georgia would someday join the alliance was seen as a weak consolation prize in the West, it has since been viewed by Russia and by some analysts as a threat to Russia's interests that provoked (and to some justified) the subsequent invasions of Georgia and Ukraine.

With NATO membership for Ukraine deferred indefinitely, the European Union–Ukraine relationship became, for the first time, the main focus of the West's interaction with Ukraine. The "Eastern Partnership" program started the European Union and Ukraine down the path toward a proposed EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. Russia countered with a series of integration proposals of its own.

Chapter 6 analyzes the period of Viktor Yanukovych's presidency in Ukraine, beginning with his election in 2010. Yanukovych appeared to have remade himself as a legitimate pragmatic politician, but upon his election he immediately began taking steps to consolidate political power, amass economic assets, and gain the support of Russia. The political consolidation convinced the democratic opposition that he would not allow another free election, scheduled for 2015. The economic consolidation threatened many of Ukraine's oligarchs. While in retrospect the stage was set for the Revolution of Dignity, few anticipated a new round of protests.

At the same time, rancor between Russia and the West intensified. The Obama "reset" policy yielded few results, and a new source of acrimony emerged in 2011, when another NATO-supported intervention ousted another autocrat, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. The Arab Spring further demonstrated the power of popular revolutions to depose authoritarian regimes, angering and worrying Putin. While Putin's 2008 "castling" with Dmitry Medvedev had demonstrated Putin's control over Russian elite politics, protests in 2011 and 2012 pointed to his potential vulnerability. Democratization and geopolitics had become almost completely fused.

By late 2013 Ukraine, Russia, and the West had gotten themselves into a contest in which a compromise was increasingly elusive. Incompatible integration proposals from Russia and the European Union created a zero-sum game between Russia and the West, forcing Ukrainians to make a choice that many of them did not want to make. What most Ukrainians supported, close economic ties with both Russia and the European

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Union, was increasingly impossible. Nor was it feasible to be a member of neither bloc, as isolation would have further undermined Ukraine's economy. At the last hour, in November 2013, Yanukovych announced that Ukraine would not sign the Association Agreement with the EU.

Chapter 7 examines the aftermath of that decision. Yanukovych's hesitation need not have led to his downfall or to an invasion. But his government repeatedly took steps that enraged citizens without foiling protests. In February 2014, the shooting of protesters led to the evaporation of Yanukovych's support, and he fled the country. Within a week, "little green men" began the seizure of Crimea, and within a month the annexation was complete. Meanwhile, seizures of government buildings occurred in cities throughout eastern Ukraine. Many were quickly reversed, but in Donetsk and Luhansk, support from Russia combined with the near absence of the Ukrainian state made it possible for separatist forces to gain a foothold.

Europe's reaction to the seizure of Crimea and intervention in Donbas was initially muted, as most elites prioritized Russia over Ukraine, and many sympathized with Russia's claims on Crimea. Another unanticipated event, the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, changed opinion dramatically. The killing of innocents and Putin's transparently disingenuous response decimated support for Russia. That put European governments on the same page as the United States in enacting sanctions. Putin's actions were now being widely compared to those of Hitler in the run-up to World War II.

When the Ukrainian armed forces threatened to encircle Russian-backed rebels in the Donbas region in the summer of 2014, Russia intervened with regular army forces. The ensuing rout forced Ukraine to accept a ceasefire agreement on Russian terms. The first Minsk agreement committed Ukraine to measures which it did not want to take, such as increasing regional autonomy. Following the seizure of the Donetsk airport by Russian-backed forces in February 2015, a second Minsk agreement acknowledged the revised lines of control.

Chapter 8 examines the period from the Minsk-2 agreement in February 2015 to the eve of war in late 2021. While the war in Donbas ebbed, it never completely stopped, and casualties gradually mounted. Russia gradually seized control of the Sea of Azov, limiting access from Ukrainian-controlled Donbas to the Black Sea. Ukraine worked to strengthen its military, organizing Territorial Defense Units to prevent a repeat of 2014. Russia and Ukraine both maneuvered for advantage in the diplomacy surrounding Minsk. Russia insisted that the agreement be implemented, while also insisting that it was not an actual party to the dispute. Ukraine voiced its commitment to fulfilling its commitments,

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but in practice found many reasons to delay implementation of what it saw as a highly disadvantageous agreement it had signed with a gun to its head. In Ukrainian politics, Russia was losing influence as a result of its 2014 invasion. If Russia had thought that the Donbas invasion and Minsk agreements were going to bring Ukraine back under its sway, it was clear by 2021 that this was not going to happen.

Chapter 9 focuses on the invasion that began in February 2022. In late 2021, a Russian troop buildup led US intelligence services to predict an imminent invasion. This kicked off a flurry of diplomacy as a succession of European leaders journeyed to Moscow to try to talk Putin out of war. Russia denied that it had any intention of invading, but Putin escalated his rhetoric and Russia advanced a draft treaty seeking wide-ranging concessions from Ukraine and the West.

On February 24, Russia invaded Ukraine. Contrary to the predictions of the same intelligence agencies that had correctly predicted the attack, Ukrainian forces held off Russian attacks on Kyiv, Kharkiv, and in Donbas. Russia had more success along the Black Sea coast, capturing a large swath of southern Ukraine. In April, Russia accepted that the attacks on Kyiv and Kharkiv were stalled and redeployed forces to focus on Donbas. From the beginning, there were discussions about a possible peace settlement, and some negotiations were held, but by Autumn 2022, there was no clear basis for a peace deal. While both sides' militaries were weakened, neither appeared to be close to exhaustion, and analysts predicted that the war might drag on for years. The West responded to the war with extensive economic sanctions, and people around the world struggled to manage the consequences. Across Europe and beyond, countries rushed to readjust their security and economic plans to deal with a dangerous new world.

Chapter 10 returns to the question of explanation. Any explanation of the war, and any assignment of blame, assumes that if particular decisions had been made differently, or some events had occurred differently, a different outcome would have resulted. To what extent is this war explained by underlying causes, such Russia's desire to regain Ukraine and the security dilemma, and to what extent is it explained by the decisions of a single actor, in this case Vladimir Putin? Was the enlargement of NATO a cause or an excuse?[38] While we can explain the initiation of war in 2014 as a response to a situation that presented both a serious challenge to Russia and a fleeting opportunity, there was no

[38] On these questions, see Kimberly Marten, "Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s," *European Journal of International Security* 3, 2 (November 2017): 135–161.

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obvious trigger to the invasion of 2022. Should we think of this as a calculated choice to take Ukraine before the chances of doing so worsened, or should we think of it as a decision by an isolated, angry, and irrational leader? The answers we give will have a large impact on the policies we advocate.

One important conclusion is that the strategy of awaiting the departure of Putin is unlikely to resolve the conflict between Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Russia's insistence on being a great power and regional hegemon, as well as its claims over Ukraine, predate Putin's rise to power, and are widely shared across the Russian elite and populace. The implication is that democracy will not lead Russia to abandon these aspirations. Indeed, only Boris Yeltsin's personal power held this agenda back in the 1990s. More broadly, the belief, derived from the democratic peace theory, that a democratic Russia will necessarily reach an accommodation with the West, runs squarely into Russia's great power aspirations. The merger of democracy with geopolitics both reduces the likelihood that Russia will become a democracy and that a democratic Russia would voluntarily agree to restrain its power to reassure its neighbors, as Germany has done.

Summary

This account stresses that the war that began in 2014 and escalated in 2022 was the product of both long-term forces in the post-Cold War environment and short-term decisions made by Russian leaders. The chances for violent conflict between Russia and Ukraine increased incrementally between 1989 and 2014, and the Minsk agreements did not resolve the conflict. It is necessary to trace this process to understand how, by 2014, Russia could decide that invading its neighbor was its best policy and why, in 2022, Russia believed that a massive new invasion would advance its interests. In 2022, it would be easy to focus simply on Russian aggression as the cause of the conflict, but I resist the temptation to read this position back into all the developments since 1991. Russia was always concerned with regaining control of Ukraine, but whether it was always determined to use force if other means failed is unclear.

The environment that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union was so much more benign than that of the Cold War that it was easy to believe that the conflicts that remained – such as the status of Ukraine – would resolve themselves over time. But three broad factors – the inability to reconcile the various actors' perceptions of the status quo and resulting security needs, the clash between the spread of western democratic institutions with Russia's views of its "sphere of interest," and the

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domestic costs of adopting conciliatory policies – combined to ensure that Ukraine's status was not resolved. Paradoxically, it was the likelihood that its status would be definitively resolved either in favor of the West or Russia that made both sides more risk acceptant.

War did not have to happen, but competition and mistrust became deeply ingrained in both the Ukraine–Russia and West–Russia relationships, and those two conflicts had become tightly connected. Those underlying conflicts were inherent in the post-Cold War system, and to see why, we need to go back to the stunning events that ended the Cold War in 1989–1991. That is where we begin in Chapter 2.

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