Policy Brief

"If you compress the spring, it will snap back hard": The Ukrainian crisis and the balance of threat theory

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Abstract

The narrative of an aggressive and neo-imperialist Russia that has dominated analyses of the 2014 Ukrainian crisis lacks theoretical rigour. We argue that a sustainable transformation of the Ukrainian crisis requires an accurate analysis of the context of the conflict, which should include an understanding of Moscow's perception of the threats to its interests. This policy brief develops a theoretical understanding of the Ukrainian crisis through the lens of Stephen M. Walt's balance of threat theory. We conclude that a realist analysis will help to explain Russian actions.

On Tuesday, 18 March 2014, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced the annexation of Crimea. Putin argued that his actions would reverse a historic injustice that had been inflicted on the Soviet Union 60 years before. The Russian move was enabled in part by severe domestic political upheaval in Ukraine caused by the Euromaidan protest movement of November 2013. The pro-European revolution swept away the elected and pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovych, with the support of ultra-right militias like the "right sector." The "Svoboda" Union, another anti-Russian voice in Ukraine, was also included in the government.

Moscow's intervention into Ukrainian affairs was framed within the pretext of helping ethnic Russians.The US and the European Union (EU) condemned Putin's invasion and threatened to impose sanctions on Moscow, a threat that was quickly implemented and steadily intensified. They also began plans to reinforce the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) presence in Eastern Europe. Their actions, in the language of international relations, might be termed balancing. Balancing is not limited to joining a powerful alliance or building up arms, two of its most classical forms, but can also refer to any state strategy that aims to reduce a perceived threat by improving the security situation of the threatened state(s) relative to the aggressor.[1]

Western news coverage of the Ukrainian crisis has been dominated by an excessively simple explanatory narrative. Russia's annexation of Crimea, which undoubtedly violated international law,

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[1] Andreas M. Bock and Ingo Henneberg, "Why balancing fails," Working Papers on International Politics and Foreign Policy 2 (2013), 1–19, http://www.jaeger.uni-koeln.de/fileadmin/templates/publikationen/aipa/AIPA_2_2013.pdf (accessed 13 October 2014).

has been interpreted in general terms as a neo-imperialist or even neo-Soviet response. Russian foreign policy has been portrayed as aiming to re-establish imperial control of the "near abroad2 (i.e. the newly independent republics that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union)—and in particular of Ukraine. This narrative of aggressive Russian intentions has often been personalized by a focus on Putin himself.[2] We suggest that such a critical narrative has been politically motivated and we therefore propose to investigate how the Ukrainian crisis might be managed, and indeed de-escalated, so that all parties involved will benefit.

We hold that the transformation of the Ukrainian crisis requires a dispassionate analysis of the global and regional context, which must include Moscow's perception of threats to its interests—a factor that has largely been missing until now.

In this brief paper, we argue that Russia's behaviour can be explained through the lens of Stephen M. Walt's "balance of threat" theory,[3] which complements balance of power theory by not only focusing on power units (e.g. military, or offensive, capabilities) but also on threats. According to balance of threat theory, state behaviour is determined by the threat perceived by other states or alliances. Walt argues that states will not balance against other states that are increasing in power (as balance of power theory predicts) but rather against those that are perceived as a threat. For instance, during the Cold War, US nuclear weapons did not threaten Western European states. The latter states perceived the US as neither aggressive nor hostile. It was therefore not a threat.

In his March 2014 speech to the Duma, Putin paraphrased Walt's core argument in a sentence that deserves greater scholarly and public attention: "If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard."[4]

We interpret this remark as an indicator that Moscow perceives Western political and military expansion (i.e. the admission of East European states into the EU and especially into NATO), as well as defence measures taken by NATO allies (i.e. missile defence), as clear, immediate, and vital threats to Russia's national security. Our guiding thesis is that balancing exacerbates the dynamic of the security dilemma and makes the perceived threat real, thereby making the balancer an even greater threat than before. The current Ukrainian crisis also shows that, when it comes to security challenges, states tend to resort to balancing against any perceived threat.

The Cuban missile crisis and the ongoing Iranian nuclear crisis support Walt's theory; in both cases the perception of a threat resulted in balancing. The US balanced against the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles into Cuba, which could have reached and destroyed Washington. From Washington's perspective, the Soviet move was an unprecedented provocation and a threat. The missiles were indeed a provocation, but they were not unprecedented; in 1959, the US had begun to install nuclear missiles in several NATO partner states, including Turkey. The Soviets had perceived Washington's move as a threat and balanced against it by deploying missiles to Cuba. The US and Israel are

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[2] Stephen M. Walt, "Why are we so busy trying to 'figure out' Vladimir Putin?" Foreign Policy, 4 January 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/04/01/putin_personality_politics_first_image (accessed 13 October 2014); Alexander J. Motyl, "Is Putin rational? Probably. Here's how to work with him," Foreign Affairs, 18 February 2014, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141039/alexander-j-motyl/is-putin-rational (accessed 13 October 2014).
[3] Stephen M. Walt, The Origins of Alliances (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).
[4] Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," 18 March 2014, http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6889 (accessed 25 September 2014).

currently balancing against a much weaker Iran (measured in terms of military capabilities and economic data to which Walt refers as "aggregate power")[5] for similar reasons, i.e. both perceive the prospect of a nuclear armed Iran as threatening to regional and world security.

These examples indicate that, because the image of a state as aggressive and perceptions of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing, perception matters; the image influences the perception, and the perception fosters the image. With respect to policy against a perceived threat, whether the state under suspicion really does have aggressive intentions is irrelevant; what matters is how those intentions are perceived and evaluated. As John J. Mearsheimer rightly notes, this also works the other way around. No matter what NATO's intentions might be, "it is the Russians, not the West, who ultimately get to decide what counts as a threat to them."[6]

In this context, Walt's balance of threat theory appears to be a convincing explanation of state behaviour. It is therefore worth applying such a theoretically driven analytical framework to the Ukrainian crisis.

Sources of threat

To distinguish threatening from non-threatening states, Walt describes four different sources of threat:

- Aggregate power refers to "a state's total resources"; the greater the aggregate power, the greater the threat a state can pose.
- Geographic proximity refers to the distance that lies between the potential competitors; the greater the distance, the more limited "the ability to project power" and the more limited the potential threat.
- Offensive power refers to the extent of "offensive capabilities"; the greater the offensive power, the greater the threat a state can pose. Offensive power is closely related to aggregate power and geographic proximity.
- Aggressive intentions refer to how states perceive a potential enemy.[7]

Although Walt regards all four dimensions as equally important, we hold that intentions most strongly influence the image that state A has of state B. From the Russian perspective, Moscow is not only influenced but also dominated by the Western hemisphere (i.e. the US, the EU, and NATO). When considering three of Walt's material sources of threat, the United States in particular becomes extremely threatening. The combined aggregate and offensive power of the US, the EU, and NATO is unprecedented. However, Russia is only the successor of the former Soviet Union, i.e. a superpower in decline. Western superiority has been reflected in concrete policy decisions toward Russia, which can easily be perceived as threats or even violations of Russian security concerns. Examples include:

- The Kosovo intervention: it was executed against the explicit objections of Russia and carried out against Serbia, an ally of Russia;
- The Iraq war: the new members of the European Union (i.e. Eastern European states) united with the US to illegally intervene in spite of the objections of France, Russia, and Germany;

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[5] Walt, Origins of Alliances, 22.

[6] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault. The liberal delusions that provoked Putin," Foreign Affairs 5, no. 93 (September 2014), http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141769/john-j-mearsheimer/why-the-ukraine-crisis-is-the-wests-fault (accessed 25 September 2014).

[7] Walt, Origins of Alliances, 21–26.

- The Libya intervention: another example of Western military interventionism using NATO as a tool to extend the UN mandate;
- The support of pro-Western actors in Eastern Europe (e.g. the Rose Revolution in Georgia) and criticism of the human rights situation and Caucasus policy of Russia;
- The eastward expansion of the EU and primarily of NATO;
- The US national missile defence (NMD) project and the NATO missile defence system.

From a Western perspective, none of these policy decisions constitutes a threat to Russia. All of them can be interpreted as peaceful, pro-democratic, or defensive, just as they can be understood as aggressive, interventional, or threatening. Indeed, an old statement by the former US secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, resonates half a century later: "Khrushchev," Dulles wrote with reference to the Soviet leader of the time, "does not need to be convinced of our good intentions. He knows we are not aggressors and do not threaten the security of the Soviet Union."[8] As we now know, Khrushchev saw the US as a severe threat to the Soviet Union, which was one of the reasons he deployed nuclear missiles to Cuba. Fifty years later, although neither offensive nor aggressive motivations might be driving Western expansion toward Russia or Western military interventions and defence investments, Moscow may, and likely does, perceive otherwise.

The Eastern expansion of NATO and missile defence

At the end of the Cold War, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the concept of the "all-European home," which was meant to help peacefully reconcile the conflict-prone Eastern and Western spheres of influence. In retrospect, and from the Russian perspective, Gorbachev's idea has been systematically transformed into the exact opposite—an exclusive Western European home with members of the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union changing sides.

In 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, former member states of the Warsaw Pact, joined NATO. A second large-scale expansion in 2004 enabled seven more Central and Eastern European countries to join (Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, as well the three former Socialist Soviet Republics, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). In 2009, Albania and Croatia also joined. Moreover, future expansion is still planned; Cyprus and Macedonia are interested in joining NATO, as are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Declassified documents and interviews have demonstrated that NATO's eastern expansion has posed a serious security concern to the Soviet Union ever since the eve of German reunification. In a 2009 interview, Gorbachev himself recalled "that Western Germany, the US, and other powers had pledged after Germany's reunification in 1990 that 'NATO would not move a centimetre to the east.'"[9]

Not surprisingly, Putin tried to delay the eastern expansion of NATO. In 2007, during the Munich security conference, he made his concerns public: "It turns out that NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders . . .NATO expansion . . . represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of

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[8] Quoted in Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 68.

[9] RIA Novosti, "Gorbachev blasts NATO eastward expansion," RIA Novosti, 2 April 2009, http://en.ria.ru/russia/20090402/120879153.html (accessed 25 September 2014).

mutual trust . . . Against whom is this expansion intended?"[10] Putin's speech was neither perceived as a warning nor was it taken into account when the West advanced further. Several years later, Russia's actions have come to be taken more seriously but remain wrongly perceived as undeniable indicators of an aggressive, neoimperialist foreign policy.

The situation is reminiscent of the Cuban missile crisis in which Khrushchev warned US president John F. Kennedy about Soviet security concerns regarding US Jupiter missiles in Turkey, which he perceived as offensive. Kennedy had never taken these complaints seriously. He then wrongly perceived the Soviet's missile deployment to Cuba as aggressive. These mistakes led the world to the brink of nuclear war.

The national missile defence program also affects the relationship between Russia and its Western neighbours. In January 1999, the US administration decided to establish an "effective National Missile Defence system capable of defending the territory of the United States against limited ballistic missile attack,"[11] and began to construct a worldwide missile defence program. Parts of the project were already installed in Alaska and the UK as well as on Aegis destroyers in the Pacific and the Mediterranean Sea. Russia perceived this as a direct threat.

According to statements from the US government, the project serves as a defensive shield against missile threats posed by rogue states. This view is strongly criticized by Russian elites, who maintain that the program strongly affects Russia's nuclear strength, and specifically its second strike capability, and thereby hinders Russia's national security. According to General Vladimir Belous, Russia's leading expert on anti-ballistic weaponry, the "US bases represent a real threat to our strategic nuclear forces."[12] Although the Western plans were modified by the Obama administration in 2009, the NMD project reinforced the Russian image of a Western "hegemonic arrogance," once again reinforcing the circle of threat.

Finding a bargaining chip

A sustainable de-escalation of the Ukrainian crisis, one that benefits the EU, the US, and Ukraine, can be achieved only if the vital security concerns of Russia are taken into consideration. As indicated by the current escalation dynamic in which both sides balance against what they perceive as a threat, focusing on balancing to improve security is counterproductive. But the question remains: what should be done?

Here, again, both the Cuban missile crisis and the Iranian nuclear crisis may serve as evidence. In order to break the cycle of escalation, a bargaining chip is required—one that is valuable to the one side and acceptable to the other. In the case of the Cuban missile crisis, the withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles from Turkey fulfilled both conditions; it was valuable to the USSR and acceptable to the US.

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[10] Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the following discussion at the Munich conference on security policy," President of Russia, 10 February 2007, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/ (accessed 25 September 2014).

[11] Congress of the United States of America, The National Missile Defense Act of 1999, http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/library/treaties/missile-defense/trty_missile-defense_NMD-ct_1999-03-00.htm (accessed 25 September 2014).

[12] Luke Harding, "Russia threatening new cold war over missile defence," Guardian, 4 November 2007, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/11/usa.topstories3 (accessed 25 September 2014).

Post-Cold War, Russia has perceived the West as practising aggressive balancing against it. And the decline of Russian influence in Europe has strengthened the image and narrative of neglected Russian interests. As Putin has made clear, "They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position . . . And with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally. After all, they were fully aware that there are millions of Russians living in Ukraine and in Crimea. They must have really lacked political instinct and common sense not to foresee all the consequences of their actions . . . If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this."[13]

How do our assumptions lead to peaceful conflict management? Like Walt, we believe that the path pursued by the Western states reinforces Russia's perceptions of threat. Balancing against an image (once again perceived) of an aggressive neoimperialist Russia reinforces the perceived threat that led to the Ukrainian crisis.Walt correctly emphasizes that "It's possible that Putin has bitten off more than Russia can comfortably swallow . . . But great powers are usually willing to suffer when their security is on the line, and that's likely to be the case here."[14]

Given the declining cooperation between the West and Russia, reinvigorated institutions and channels of communication between the two sides are required:

- There is a need for (verbal) de-escalation: "Putin–Hitler comparisons" and the blackmailing of "Putin Versteher" [people who try to understand Putin] within Western discourse are counterproductive.
- Europe should formulate a common political strategy toward Russia within the EU; NATO has no political instrument to solve this crisis.
- Military measures such as new NATO command structures in Eastern Europe or new rapid response forces may be useful in assuaging the threat perceived by the Eastern European states and strengthening NATO's credibility but could also escalate the tensions between the Russia and the West. Accordingly, military measures are less helpful than they are symbolic. We are opposed to the termination of the NATO-Russia-Founding Act and its trust-building mechanisms, which is being proposed by Canada and others.
- It is important to make clear to all actors that Ukraine does not have to choose between Russia and the West. Including Ukraine in both Russian and Western institutions may result in de-escalation of the conflict. Ukrainian membership in NATO, therefore, should not be an option in the near future.

There is undoubtedly a need for (critical) dialogue and international pressure. We do not advocate sacrificing or undermining Western values by merely giving in to Russian demands. Yet, given the important and valuable economic and cultural linkages and interdependencies between Russia and the West, escalation would harm both sides. Moreover, Russia is needed in international crises (e.g. Syria, Iran, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, climate change, and any important decisions within the

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[13] Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation."
[14] Stephen M. Walt, "No contest," Foreign Policy, 3 March 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/03/no_contest_ukraine_obama_putin (accessed 25 September 2014).

UN). Massive economic sanctions and the termination of international cooperation are therefore not viable. Successful conflict management requires channels of communication and dialogue.

Similarly, efforts to strengthen Russia's offensive capabilities send the wrong signal at the wrong time. The—rather late—termination of weapon exports to Russia (prominently French Mistral-class landing helicopter docks) is a good decision and sends a strong signal. The EU/NATO should seek a (financial) solution to these issues.

Mediators in the inner-Ukrainian conflict could also learn from other civil wars. Generally, lasting agreements include security guarantees for the parties involved and also address the interests of potential foreign actors. The recent violent clashes and massive military operations in the Eastern Ukraine demand a political, not a military, solution. A power-sharing approach, a political system that includes all the relevant stakeholders, and supervision by external actors could stop the violence.

Our analysis indicates that these external actors perceive the situation in Ukraine as a vital interest. We once again agree with Walt's observation that "Russia has spent the last 20-plus years watching the United States and ist European allies expand NATO eastward and deploy ballistic missile defences there, to boot, with near-total disregard for Russian interests and complaints . . .But any good realist could have told you that Russia would regard these developments as a long-term security challenge."[15] From a theoretical perspective, realism could help explain the Russian reaction to the Ukrainian conflict. Using the realist lens represents neither a positive evaluation of Russian actions nor a condemnation of Western values, and analyzing the crisis "realistically" can and should serve to help resolve it.

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[15] Ibid.