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Article

The Realist debate in the context of the War in Ukraine: balancing dynamics, international change and strategic calculus

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Abstract

The article discusses Mearsheimer's interpretation of Russia's use of force against Ukraine based on concepts and categories of Offensive Realism. It is argued that external balancing lost its place during unipolarity. However, Russian internal balancing is one of the factors that enabled the current conflict, and Russia's rapprochement with China diminishes the prospects for conflict in Asia, allowing Russian military efforts to be concentrated in the European theater. Additionally, the decision to use force will be analyzed in its strategic dimension. It is concluded that Russia's activities against Ukraine are entirely consistent with Offensive Realism, despite of Mearsheimer's allegations contrarywise.

Keywords: Balance of Power; Balancing; Realism; Russia; Ukraine.

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, when the Crimea Peninsula was seized by Russia in 2014, the opinions of John Mearsheimer - founder of Offensive Structural Realism - have gotten attention in academic, political and media circles, as the author defends the controversial thesis that the conflict was provoked by Western countries. Allegedly based on a Structural-Realist perspective and the idea that great powers seek spheres of influence, Mearsheimer (2014; 2015; 2022) argues that the Ukrainian crisis is a direct result of NATO's post-Cold War expansion, bringing in countries that formerly were part of USSR's sphere of influence. In this sense, the declaration, after the Bucharest Summit in 2008, that Georgia and Ukraine would

be admitted to the alliance was the culmination of a policy perceived by Russia as a threat to its security[1]. At the same time, Mearsheimer characterizes NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe as part of a foreign and defense policy dazzled by the promises of liberalism. In other words, NATO expansion would be a misguided and unrealistic policy, motivated by liberal peace theory, which advocates the adoption of the liberal democratic model by an increasing number of countries, leading to the supposed decrease on the prospects for the use of force and the pacification of the whole of Europe.

Mearsheimer (2014; 2015) was widely criticized in Western countries and celebrated by Russian authorities. In the US, his explanation was judged by many as a justification of Russian actions. However, causal explanations cannot be confused with justifications. Explaining a phenomenon is not the same as excusing or approving conduct. Nevertheless, it is worth questioning whether Mearsheimer's analysis is, at the very least, consistent with the Offensive-Realist research program and whether it would be the best possible analysis within that program. This is also a legitimate analysis, and if the conclusions coincide with the preferences or propaganda of any side, it is entirely unreasonable to claim that this analysis should be changed or hidden for this reason. The world of propaganda is one, that of analysis and scientific discussion is another.

In this context, a systemic analysis of the Ukrainian crisis will first be presented, discussing different Realist approaches, in order to elucidate the internal and external balancing dynamics involved in the conflict. In addition, Russian decisions will be analyzed in their strategic dimension. It is argued that traditional/strong external balancing (i.e. the formation of counter-hegemonic military alliances) has lost its place in the course of the unipolar system inaugurated with the end of the Cold War. However, traditional/strong internal balancing against the US has been widely carried out by countries such as China and Russia, with Russian internal balancing being one of the factors that made the current conflict possible. On the other hand, Russia's rapprochement with China diminishes the prospects of conflict in Asia and allows Russia to focus its military efforts on the European theater. The Chinese reaction to the Ukrainian crisis, on the other hand, is part of a hedging strategy: there is no clear choice of external balancing by China, but there is a diplomatic-military rapprochement with Russia, which allows China to take advantage of the intense defense cooperation with Russia, while avoiding being dragged into that country's security problems. Finally, it is argued that, from a strategic point of view, securing access to the port of Sevastopol is central to Russia's decision to use force.

[1] As stipulated in the Bucharest Declaration: "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries **will become** members of NATO" (emphasis added). See North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO. "Bucharest Summit Declaration." P*ress Release (2008) 049*. Accessed on: October 28, 2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/us/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm

Realist theories and the war in Ukraine

In an attempt to map the available explanations for the Ukrainian crisis, Sushentsov and Wohlforth (2020) provide the following lines of interpretations:

1. Russia is imperialist (and therefore aggressive/offensive), while the US, NATO and Ukraine only want to guarantee their security (and are therefore politically and strategically on the defensive);
2. the US and NATO pursued an aggressive policy of NATO expansion (thus being on the political offensive) and Russia only reacted by defending itself against NATO's entry into its sphere of influence;
3. both sides are only trying to defend themselves and, with defensive actions, would end up generating the mistaken perception in the opponent that they had offensive intentions - a position that refers to the well-known security dilemma proposed by Herz (1950); and
4. the two sides have offensive intentions and have acted aggressively, generating a security spiral and triggering the current conflict.

Regarding the last explanation, Sushentsov and Wohlforth (2020) maintain that the security spiral is an offshoot of Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism (2001), as it is consistent with the following line of reasoning: faced with uncertainty about the intentions of others, as well as the current and future amount of an opponent´s capabilities, great powers tend to accumulate power constantly, generating, as a result, a security spiral between rival powers. In this sense, NATO's expansion would be the result of a US policy of increasing power and engaging abroad so as to maintain its systemic position. On the other hand, according to these authors, the Russian reaction would stem from the same logic: in the face of distrust about the intentions of the US and other NATO countries, Russian security would be obtained by the accumulation of power through the annexation of Crimea and the denial of Ukraine's incorporation into NATO. In addition, Sushentsov and Wohlforth (2020) argue that Russia is reacting against the security arrangements that have been consolidated in post-Cold War Europe: the problem is not just NATO's expansion, but the centrality given to the alliance by the Europeans and the US, to the detriment of building new security arrangements in which Russia also plays a leading role.

It should be noted that Sushentsov and Wohlforth (2020) use concepts from Mearsheimer himself (2001) to produce an alternative Realist interpretation of the crisis. However, other aspects of Offensive Realism should be brought into the discussion. Firstly, according to Mearsheimer (2001), the influence of a regional hegemon is not limited to its region. For the author, the regional hegemon is able to exercise the strategy of offshore balancing, which consists of intervening in those regions where there is a potential regional hegemon, particularly at times when regional balancing proves insufficient to contain the rise of regional hegemony. This means that the only regional hegemon in the system can exert its influence in one or more regions where there are

potential regional hegemons, depending on its material capabilities compared to the great powers in each region. In this sense, NATO's expansion policy would be consistent with its attempt to exert influence in Europe by containing the emergence of potential regional hegemons (most probably Russia, but not necessarily only Russia) in that region. In a nutshell, offshore balancing is always a possibility presented to the only regional hegemon in the system.

At the same time, the influence over other regions is not necessarily limited to the offshore balancing strategy. That is to say that the hypothesis that NATO's expansion is consistent with Offensive Realism does not require the existence of a potential hegemon in Europe acting as such. According to Mearsheimer (2001), great powers never stop maximizing power, in other words, they are never satisfied, status quo powers. It follows that the US should only stop maximizing power if it achieves global hegemony. Given the practically unattainable requirements for global hegemony (especially absolute nuclear superiority), the US was not a global hegemon in the 1990s, in Mearsheimer's very own terms, and therefore could not behave like a satisfied/status quo power. Russia's weakness in the 1990's created the perfect opportunity for NATO's gaining of power at Russia's expense: Russia's incapacity to confront NATO, due to its weakness enables the latter to act immediately to further, and enduringly, constrain and reduce future (at the time) Russia's maneuvering room for its own attempts of power-gaining. Therefore, NATO's expansion is consistent with the opportunity to maximize power in the post-Cold War context, since it is precisely the collapse of USSR — leaving in its wake a weaker Russia — that provides the US with this opportunity/structural incentive.

Secondly, NATO's expansion policy is in line with the policy recommendations of Offensive Realism insofar as the accession of new members to the alliance: (i) makes it more difficult for the hostile power (particularly the potential hegemon) to accumulate power at the expense of countries until then outside the alliance; (ii) potentially adds territories that could bring significant strategic advantage on the alliance, or else subtract or make it more difficult for others (particularly the potential hegemon) to gain access to strategically useful areas; (iii) if the added territory significantly hinders the potential hegemon's access to the other members of the alliance and/or facilitates advanced action that minimizes or reduces the risks and costs of an eventual war for them.

In short, contrarywise to what Mearsheimer has claimed, a dispute between Russia and NATO in Ukraine, in his own terms, should not be taken as an outcome of a strategic error stemming from a liberal illusion (or, at least, it doesn't boil down to that); on the contrary, if we stick strictly to the concepts and dynamics of Offensive Realism as proposed by Mearsheimer it can be characterized as a textbook case of the "Tragedy of Great Power Politics".

A few more observations are in order:

1. From the point of view of any structural analysis, Offensive Realism included, motivation is irrelevant, being a "second image" (Waltz 1959) or "reductionist" (Waltz 1979) explanation. If the consideration of NATO expansion in general, and to Ukraine in particular, stemmed from a "liberal illusion" or a calculation to weaken and contain Russia, this would make

no difference to Offensive Realism. If the incorporation of Ukraine hinders or complicates Russian expansionist actions, for whatever reason, this should be, according to "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", the behavior to adopt;

2. Not expanding NATO to the East, and particularly to Ukraine, to avoid provoking Russia, would unequivocally mean, according to "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", adopting the strategy of appeasement, as described by Mearsheimer (2001): giving in to the threat of others in the vain hope of containing revisionist or expansionist attitudes, while allowing them to increase their power. Based on Mearsheimer's (2001) own discussion about "strategies for losing power", it is clear that we stand before an exemplary case of a behavior that, for Mearsheimer (2001), is the diametrically opposite behavior to that which should be adopted by a great power, according to his own criteria.

That said, we can start from this inconsistency to assess other aspects of the Realist discussion, particularly the balance of power approaches[2] . The so-called "balance of power theories" were dedicated to studying the formation of systemic equilibriums, which take the form of polar structures. According to Waltz (1979), the main proponent of Structural Realism, the international system tends towards equilibrium between the main powers of each era. In Waltz (1979), the only two equilibria analyzed are bipolarity and multipolarity (without any specification). In this sense, the systemic result of equilibrium would be achieved through two main behaviors on the part of the powers (referred to here as *incumbent powers*) and would-be powers (or *rising powers*): internal balancing and external balancing. The first refers to the internal efforts (strengthening armed forces, economic development etc.) undertaken by each state to confront the power of possible adversary powers, while the second refers to the formation of military alliances to confront a common adversary power in the event of a war - it should be noted that, strictly speaking, military alliances are not necessarily characterized by formalization or institutionalization, but by the expectation of mutual defense in the event of an attack or threat to one or more members of the security arrangement.

In contrast, Gilpin (1981) argues that hegemonic structures (i.e., with a single power dominating the others) are historically frequent and durable. On the one hand, hegemonic structures eliminate the rivalry that can trigger wars between incumbent powers and rising powers. On the other hand, the hegemonic power produces stability through the provision of global public goods - such as the protection of the seas and the guarantee of free movement in maritime trade zones (Gilpin 1981). In this respect, Gilpin's (1981) approach is still a theory of power equilibrium, since the systemic situation referred to as hegemonic is considered stable/durable given the virtual

[2] The term "equilibrium" much better describes the phenomenon analyzed by these approaches, which is the result of the actions of the great powers (and not the action itself, which should be referred as balancing), in much the same way as the concept of equilibrium in Game Theory or Microeconomics. It is not impossible that an important part of the conceptual difficulties so present in some approaches or some authors stems precisely from inattention to this distinction and its logical consequences, its corollaries. The term "balancing" refers to the behavior that aims to produce systemic equilibrium as a final result. Therefore, "equilibrium or balance of power theories" refer to the systemic result, while "balancing theories" seek to make sense of the behavior of the units towards equilibrium/balance.

impossibility of balancing. Hegemony is therefore a type of equilibrium disregarded by Waltz (1979) but emphasized by Gilpin (1981). It is an equilibrium situation analogous to that of a monopoly in the structure of an industry or a market (references are legion).

After Gilpin (1981), this debate was fought both in terms of hegemony and in terms of unipolarity[3]. With the end of the Cold War, most Realist authors characterized the system of the 1990s as unipolar, with the US being the sole remaining great power. However, there were disagreements about the durability of this systemic configuration. Layne (1993) argued that unipolarity was a passing moment, an interlude between bipolarity and multipolarity, which would be achieved as a result of traditional hard balancing dynamics. Waltz (1993), in a particularly vehement manner, also argued in the same direction. Wohlforth (1999) argued that the concentration of power in the US would be durable insofar as, among other factors, the formation of military alliances against the US would face collective action problems. In other words, external balancing would not be an automatic consequence of the anarchic structure of the system; in the case of unipolarity, in fact, the anarchic structure of the system would make external balancing behavior unfeasible, due to various factors - among them, the difficulty of political coordination between three or more actors. Furthermore, Wohlforth (1999) argued that maintaining security mechanisms inherited from the Cold War, such as NATO, would be a way of prolonging US preponderance at low cost[4].

Given the durability of the unipolar system and the absence of external balancing behavior against the US in the post-Cold War period, proponents of power balancing theories have suggested that, in unipolarity, the characteristics of the balancing phenomenon have been transformed. According to T.V. Paul (2018), supposedly hard balancing has lost its place in the contemporary international system in the face of the prevalence of behaviors such as soft balancing and limited hard balancing. In other words, according to this scholar, the lack of military alliances against the US in the post-Cold War era – that is, the lack of external hard balancing - does not mean the end of balancing dynamics, but rather its transformation in the contemporary world.

For T. V. Paul (2018), soft balancing involves: "restraining the power or aggressive policies of a state through international institutions, concerted diplomacy via limited, informal ententes, and economic sanctions in order to make its aggressive actions less legitimate in the eyes of the world and hence its goals more difficult to obtain" (Paul 2018, 20). Limited hard balancing, on the other hand, has a clear military component, comprising limited military strengthening and the creation of semi-formal military alliances or strategic partnerships. What differentiates these partnerships from traditional balancing alliances is the absence of an expectation of defense on

[3] Although the terms "unipolarity" and "hegemony" are often used interchangeably, the fact is that the conditions that define unipolarity, for Wohlforth (1999), are much less demanding than those that define hegemony, and especially a possible global hegemony, according to Mearsheimer. As a result, in Mearsheimer's (2001) case, there is an unfilled gap, which would allow the characterization of a situation that is distinct from both "unbalanced" bipolarity and hegemony, as Mearsheimer (2001) understands them. For a more detailed discussion, see Diniz (2006, 114-115).

[4] At this point, it is interesting to note that William Wohlforth's work (notably his 1999 article on the stability of a unipolar world) presents relevant considerations for this discussion that are little explored in the 2020 article.

the part of the partners (present in strong balancing and absent in soft and limited balancing). Security cooperation in limited balancing can involve information and technology sharing, joint military exercises, and partnerships against non-traditional threats (such as terrorism and drug trafficking) (Han and Paul 2020, 5).

The thesis about the transformation of the balancing phenomenon was criticized by authors such as Wohlforth and Brooks (2005), who pointed out the lack of conceptual independence of the idea of soft balancing. According to them, the phenomena often characterized as "soft balancing" are mostly typical situations of bargaining and negotiation between states with divergent interests. The mere divergence of opinions between state representatives on the framing of international problems or interests in their solution cannot be confused with balancing.

Contrary to the intentions of the soft and limited balancing proponents, what this discussion not only reveals, but amply corroborates, is the difficulty of strong external balancing in unipolarity, but not the transformation of the balancing phenomenon itself. To better characterize our divergence with this literature, it is necessary to critically revisit Waltz's original theory (1979). It should be noted that the perspective of a threat to the survival of states - understood as the loss of the condition of an independent political unit in the system - is at the basis of the balance of power approaches (Waltz 1979). The search for systemic equilibrium and the reaction to concentrations of power (hegemonies) aim to contain possible expansionist actions on the part of powers that might eventually become hegemonic. According to this logic, by reducing a potential hegemon's prospects of success in war, the search for equilibrium is a mechanism for inhibiting wars. Since wars have historically been the most drastic and rapid factor in changes to the balance of power, balancing has the effect of producing systemic stability - remembering that, in this context, stability refers to the longevity of a given balance of power configuration, even with some internal changes (for example, the departure of some actor from the group of great powers and the incorporation of another, but maintaining the configuration of multipolarity or bipolarity).

In contrast to this understanding, the war in Ukraine, while highlighting the fact that balancing dynamics continue to operate, corroborates that balancing is not always capable of producing stability and inhibiting conflicts, and can be a factor in destabilization and international change (Dawood 2013; 2018; 2020). To stay within the conceptual framework of Offensive Realism, the internal balancing carried out by Russia (which meant the accumulation of conventional forces by that country since the military reform of 2008) is what have provided material conditions for Russian authorities to adopt the most drastic behavior in increasing power (or in confronting the tendency to weakening), which is, in Mearsheimer's terms (2001), war. On the other hand, the diplomatic-military rapprochement between Russia and China allows Russia's efforts to be concentrated in the European theater (and, incidentally, China's efforts to the east). In the following section, the balancing dynamics involved in the current Ukrainian crisis will be discussed.

Balancing dynamics, stability and international change: a systemic analysis of the Ukrainian crisis

Although it is not possible to say that the decision to invade Ukraine, and particularly at the specific moment in which it occurred, was an automatic consequence of the international systemic structure, the various strands of Structural Realism help to highlight the structural conditioning factors and incentives for Russia's decision to go to war. While the unipolarity inaugurated at the end of the Cold War makes external systemic balancing against the US on a global scale extremely difficult, it encourages internal balancing on the part of the second-tier powers, which tend to react to the over-concentration of power in the US; and encourages the use of any circumstantial opportunity (such as a possible perception of weakness in US leadership) for those powers to try to expand their power regionally, albeit at some risk; but in such circumstances, a delay could mean an even greater risk.

Internal balancing can be understood as:

> a set of state actions that have the potential to reduce the gap between the power capabilities of the rising pole(s) and the incumbent pole(s), increasing the chances of success of the former in relation to the latter in the event of a major systemic war (i.e., a war between the main powers of a given international system) (Dawood 2020, 300).

The incentive for internal balancing in unipolarity is to the detriment of external balancing, i.e., the formation of formal military alliances. This is because, by definition, unipolarity refers to that structural situation in which the union between second-tier powers is not enough to match/balance the power of the unipole (Layne 1993). In the absence of external balancing as a mechanism for structural transformation and the control of hegemonies, the restoration of multipolar or bipolar equilibrium is left to internal balancing. In this sense, in unipolarity, the internal balancing undertaken by the second-tier powers has the potential to destabilize the unipolar system, resulting in bipolar or multipolar structures. In other words, internal balancing can bring about international systemic change (Dawood 2013) – and, in unipolarity, it tends to be the main factor.

Starting in 2008, Russia began a military reform that can be characterized as a process of internal balancing, resulting in increased expectations of success in the eventual confrontation of the unipole. The country sought to modernize the forces inherited from the Soviet Union, investing particularly in narrowing the gap between Western and Russian conventional forces, as well as reducing the relative importance of nuclear weapons in the country's arsenal (Dall'agnol 2022). In view of the wars fought by Russia in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (since 2014) and Syria (since 2015), the importance of developing and using drones has become clear, especially for gathering intelligence as a basis for using long-range artillery to avoid contact in combat. In addition, investment has been made in anti-aircraft defense, including electronic

countermeasures[5] to deny the adversary information gathering and rapid decision-making on the use of artillery[6].

On the other hand, the diplomatic-military rapprochement with China has allowed Russia to neutralize (at least in the short and medium term) any problems in the Asian region and to concentrate its balancing efforts against NATO forces. Article 9 of the treaty signed between Russia and China in 2001 and renewed in 2021 (known as the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation) establishes immediate consultation with the partner in the event of a perceived threat. Moreover, there are regular instances of military contact, such as the "China-Russia Intergovernmental Joint Commission on Military Technology", which has held annual meetings since 1992, with arms sales as its priority topic . Contact is also established in multilateral forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Moscow Security Conference, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting and the Shangri-La Dialogue. There is also a strong presence of Chinese military personnel sent to study in Russia (3,600 in the last 20 years) (Blank 2020).

Since the early 2000s, joint military exercises have taken place under the name "Peace Missions", which initially had the aim of dealing with terrorism, but have evolved into joint action in wider war situations. Since 2012, the exercises have taken place in the Baltic, Mediterranean, Yellow Sea and South China Sea. For Blank (2020, 12), the growing maritime role of China and Russia could challenge US power in the Asia-Pacific and produce a multipolar maritime order in Asia. Finally, the arms trade between Russia and China has intensified, with the Russian authorities transferring more technologically advanced systems to the Chinese (Su-35 fighters, the S-400 air defense system), as well as the joint development of Amur-class submarines (Blank 2020).

Although there are quite divergent security interests between Russia and China, there is convergence in terms of the objective of preventing/decreasing US interference in matters that both consider domestic (such as Taiwan) and regional (such as the Ukrainian situation). In this sense, even if the military relationship between China and Russia does not constitute an alliance, it is clearly anti-US. Regardless of the name given to the security relationship between Russia and China (undeclared alliance; strategic partnership; good neighborliness and friendly cooperation...), the result of the rapprochement is to reduce the chances of an open confrontation between these countries; but it doesn't seem that either is willing to go to war to help the other. In this sense, the dynamics of the relationship between Russia and China suggest a hedging strategy: while maintaining economic engagement with the US, the Chinese are preparing themselves militarily for an eventual direct confrontation with the Americans via internal balancing and, together with Russia, stabilizing

[5] By "electronic capabilities", we mean the use of both the electromagnetic spectrum and of computational infrastructure and networks (which are also physical, and not the magical entity frequently referred to as "the cyberspace"). This is in contrast with most of the literature and can not be addressed here. Also, there is a lot of talk on "information warfare" and capabilities related to impact "the cognitive dimension of the informational environment" through disinformation, propaganda, and sabotage — which are not, strictly speaking, war-fighting capabilities. One of the authors is currently working on the matter. For preliminary work, see (Diniz 2023).

[6] For additional information, see Charap et al. (2021) and Kofman et. al. (2021).

their north-northeast front. At the same time, for China, this strategy avoids the risk of entrapment in Russian security affairs. For Russia, this rapprochement minimizes possible security concerns and disagreements with China in its Southeast, at least temporarily freeing it for more assertive actions in the West and Southwest (in addition to Ukraine, there is Georgia, the entire Caucasus region and, in particular, the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan), priority areas for Russia.

Strategic calculation and the decision to use force

The systemic conditioning factors presented above provide information on the maneuvering room for second-tier powers to act and react in unipolarity. However, evaluating the decision whether or not to use force involves the analysis of possible strategic calculations from Russian leadership. At this point, a caveat is in order. Though the issue cannot be thoroughly explored here, it is important to come to grips with the puzzling way in which Mearsheimer (2001) handles the issue of the rationality assumption. The whole point of this assumption is to enable building a theory of behavior under structural constraints: to put forth a very pedestrian example, one will not be able to comment a chess match if one assumes that the players do not understand the game and its rules; one must assume that the players know their businesses. On the other hand, this does not mean that every move by each player will always be a good one. For instance, one may fail to realize all the long-term implications of a move by the adversary. The game will still be chess, and should the match be played to the end, either one of the players will be successful despite his/her flaws, or there will be a draw. The same thing goes here: one cannot build a theory of international political behavior under power constraints by assuming that everyone will always play badly; consistent strategic behavior must be identified assuming that states (actually, states' political leadership) know their business. This does not mean that every move will always be perfect, and this deviation from the ideal does not mean that the actors are "irrational" in the strictest sense of being uncapable of acting according to one's own interests, but that this rationality is exercised under significant constraints. Theories that employ the rationality assumption cannot describe nor predict every decision taken. According to Waltz (1979), theoretical assumptions (such as the assumption that states act rationally) are not a description of reality, but rather their validity is conditioned on their usefulness in building theory[7]

[7] In Waltz´s (1979, 117-118) own terms: "A theory contains at least one theoretical assumption. Such assumptions are not factual. One therefore cannot legitimately ask if they are true, but only if they are useful". In treating the rationality assumption as a description of reality, Mearsheimer (2001) offers a much less sophisticated rational theory. In addition, it is interesting to note that his discussion systematically fail to address properly some other issues, such as the fact that there are lots of situations in which what is rational for an individual (or for a small group) might not be rational for a group (or the larger group). Under this light, Mearsheimer (2001) not only fails to properly address the role of the rationality assumption for theory, but also insists that moves by a state (actually, by its leadership) must be actually rational — even in the modified sense of Mearsheimer and Rosato (2023). One reads there, for instance: "*As noted, we define a state as rational if its strategy is based on a credible theory and is the result of a deliberative process. Rational policy-makers are theory-driven; they employ credible theories to make sense of the world and decide the best way to achieve some goal. Rational states aggregate the views of different policymakers in two steps: a robust and uninhibited debate and a policy choice made by an ultimate decider*" (Mearsheimer and Rosato, 2023, 7). For a superior consideration of the rationality assumption, the works of Waltz (1979; 1997) and Thomas Schelling (1980, 16-20) are still useful.

In a nutshell, our argument says nothing about Russia's (or President Putin's, or Russian leaders') rationality or lack thereof. The employment of the rationality assumption serves analysts as a parameter to evaluate decision making and the outputs of those decisions; it is not an actual expectation nor an accurate description of states' (or their leaders') concrete behavior or decisions. All we mean is that: there is an argument, *consistent with Offensive Realism*, for NATO's expansion; and that, even without NATO's expansion, there would be reasons, also entirely consistent with Offensive Realism, for Russian's (or President Putin's) decision to annex Crimea and, later, invade Ukraine. It is not implied that Russia's decision was taken on the very grounds discussed here.

About that, it is important to keep in mind that Russia did not resort to force in response to NATO's expansion in 2004 into the Baltic countries (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania), which were part of the former USSR and whose territories border Russia; but it did act forcefully in Georgia in 2008; it is very active in the disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh; and, of course, since 2014, it has been particularly active in Ukraine. This strongly suggests that, from the point of view of the Russian leadership, it is not just a matter of NATO's expansion per se, but of greater or lesser freedom of action in certain crucial areas. It is therefore worth analyzing what the elements of the Russian authorities' strategic calculus might be, in order to try to discern the reasons for the variation in their behavior (Diniz 2022a; 2022b).

Although the reforms made it possible for Russia to act more assertively in 2022, they are not the only factor explaining Russian actions in the region. It is possible that one of the central elements of the explanation lies precisely in the strategic aspects, arising from logistical and tactical realities, present in both countries. At the same time, it is impossible to rely exclusively on official statements to try to understand those priorities and calculations, because there are plenty of reasons why the parties may wish to mask them, camouflage them, adjust them, relate them to political elements; in short, to mask their intentions. Thus, this calculation needs to be inferred in an almost craft-like way, based on broader, more general knowledge of the conduct of war activities; of the particular strategic situation of the actors involved, or at least of those who have greater capacity for initiative; and of the windows of opportunity opened or closed by the respective domestic political realities (Diniz and Proença Jr. 2020).

As far as Ukraine is concerned, a key element is that Crimea is home to the naval base of Sevastopol, which gives the Russians access to the Mediterranean Sea via the Black Sea. This access is indispensable for Russia's projection of power beyond its immediate regional surroundings and, in particular, for Russia's actions in the Middle East. The alternative, which would be the Russian naval base in Novorossiysk, is not comparable to Sevastopol, due to the large number of bays and inlets with deep waters available in the latter, and the ease of installation and protection of vast infrastructure related to it, due to the physical characteristics of the Crimean Peninsula: ample space on the peninsula, easily defensible due to the narrowness of the isthmus that connects it to the mainland. Sevastopol belonged to Russia from its establishment as a naval base by Catherine the Great until Crimea was ceded to Ukraine by the USSR in 1954. Since 2011, Russia has

been gradually increasing and overhauling its Black Sea Fleet; the Caspian Flotilla has also been modernized since the 2000s. It is crucial to keep the following in mind: there is no way Russia can act in certain areas of its political interest without access to Sevastopol (Diniz 2022a; 2022b). After the end of the USSR, it was granted access by lease, which lasted until 2017. However, Viktor Yushchenko, Ukrainian president between 2005 and 2010, signaled that he would not renew the agreement. After the election of Viktor Yanukovych in 2010, the agreement was renewed until 2042. However, after a series of protests, Yanukovych was overthrown in 2014 (Diniz 2022a). In this sense, Russia's annexation of Crimea is intrinsically related to the need to guarantee Russian access to Sevastopol. But in addition to the possession of the territory (albeit de facto and not by right), it is also possible to infer the Russian objective of creating a land passage between Russia and Crimea, in order to make access to Sevastopol even safer for the Russians. Thus, in addition to the links with the Russian-speaking part of the oblasts in the Donetski Basin region, the control, albeit indirect, of those regions would allow Russia to consolidate its control and access to the Crimean Peninsula. In a way, this would have been formally established with the signing of the Minsk II agreement in February 2015, with the formal recognition by the Ukrainian government of the autonomy of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, creating a land corridor between Russia and Crimea.

However, the gradual and consistent strengthening of the Ukrainian armed forces since 2015, especially in the face of Western support and training, has revealed the precariousness of Russian control over its land access to Crimea. This set of considerations suggests that Russia's minimum objective with the campaign that began in February 2022 is to secure control over the Donetski Basin region, guaranteeing the land corridor between Russia and Crimea. However, this situation will only become more robust, less precarious, if Russian forces manage to substantially weaken Ukrainian forces, making it difficult or neutralizing, for a long time, any reasonable expectation that they will retake the Donetski Basin. Failure to achieve these two main objectives will mean that the campaign that began in 2022 will have been a waste of forces for Russia. The achievement of these two main objectives, on the other hand, would mean the resumption of Russian influence in its regional surroundings and the consequent loss of NATO influence in that area (Diniz 2022a). Naturally, this result would be maximized if Russia were to occupy the whole of Ukraine, nullifying its existence as an autonomous political unit.

In this sense, several analysts have claimed that Russia attempted a "Blitzkrieg", with the aim of quickly seizing the capital Kiev. These same analysts argue that Russia underestimated the Ukrainian forces and that the Russians failed to achieve this maximalist goal. In contrast, this analysis of the failure of a Blitzkrieg seems more in line with the Western assessment of Ukrainian resolve and capabilities - remember that the US president even offered to help the Ukrainian president leave the country at the start of the 2022 campaign. The Russians, meanwhile, had been fighting the Ukrainians in the Donetski Basin region since 2015, which gave them first-hand experience of Ukrainian capabilities. Given this, the march to Kiev can alternatively be interpreted not as an attempt at annexation, but as political pressure for recognition of the annexation of Crimea;

and/or for Ukraine not to contest the annexation of Donetsk and Luhansk; and/or for Ukraine to commit to not joining NATO. The idea that Russia's aim was simply to take Kiev and install a puppet government doesn't hold much water: firstly, taking Kiev without first substantially weakening Ukrainian forces would tend to lead to a much more fluid and protracted situation, with actions against Russian or pro-Russian forces elsewhere (particularly in the Donetski Basin), while Russian forces would be locked in Kiev. In addition, based on the behavior of Russian forces in other locations - such as Mariupol - local resistance was countered with intense bombardment prior to and during incursions, reducing Ukrainian forces there as drastically as possible; none of this occurred around Kiev in the first weeks of the campaign. Furthermore, if the Russian priority was to take Kiev, and not control of the Donetski Basin, it is surprising that the forces withdrew from the vicinity of Kiev towards the latter, and not from the Donetski Basin towards Kiev. Actions and decisions communicate objectives and priorities much more clearly than statements by officials or comments by analysts.

This does not mean that declarations are completely irrelevant. The fact that Russia has decided to annex, even in the face of slower progress than many would have expected, an even larger area (also including Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblasts) than Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, suggests a kind of commitment (in the sense given by Schelling, 1960; 1966) to an outcome that goes beyond those minimum objectives, but which, on the other hand, falls short of what could be the maximalist objective of occupying all of Ukraine. It is possible that this reflects a decision to reduce the scope of its action, due to possible difficulties and costs (in terms of resources, equipment, life, economic difficulties, etc.) greater than expected, which is always a possibility - and a very frequent one - in the history of campaigns and wars.

There is no doubt that the political objectives may change over the course of the war, depending on the results of the campaign that began in 2022. At the time of writing, Russia's objectives seemed to extend beyond control of the Donetsk Basin region. In September 2022, Russia had declared the annexation of the territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia and, in November 2022, the city of Kherson was retaken by Ukrainian forces (after Russian forces withdrew without incurring in significant loss from Ukrainian fire), followed by Ukraine's proposal for a peace agreement, which Russia responded to by bombing western Ukraine. In this sense, an analysis of Russia's possible political objectives may suggest the likely settlement horizon for the Russian authorities: it is quite unlikely that the Russians will accept a peace agreement that involves giving up the Donetski Basin and/or Crimea; more uncertain is what might happen to the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblasts. At this moment (October 2023), a long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive by forces with the new equipment supplied by its Western allies has all but failed, and it might be possible that the Ukrainian recruiting pool is dwindling fast.

In short, an analysis of the war in Ukraine, made of clashes that began in 2014 and escalated with the 2022 campaign, cannot do without strategic considerations about the conditions that make it possible for Russia to exercise regional influence, especially access to seas and control of naval bases and ports.

Final remarks

The analysis of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent activity shows the inconsistency between the analysis made by Mearsheimer (2014, 2022) and his own version of Offensive Realism (Mearsheimer 2001). In particular, the idea that the US should have refrained from expanding NATO in the post-Cold War period is not consistent with the assumption of power maximization advocated by Offensive Realism. It is not right to say that the war is the result of a policy dictated by political liberalism, when the power structure itself generates incentives for the alliance's expansion policy.

Secondly, we referred to theories of balancing and equilibrium/balance of power to identify the incentives and systemic processes related to the war in Ukraine. Contemporary debates on the supposed transformation of balancing into soft versions have highlighted the difficulties of exercising external balancing (forming military alliances) in the course of US unipolarity. As a result, there is a systemic incentive for internal balancing on the part of the second-tier powers and/or rising powers such as Russia and China. At the same time, the military rapprochement between China and Russia, although it cannot be characterized as a military alliance (and therefore does not constitute external balancing), reduces the prospects of conflict between these countries and gives Russia greater freedom of action in the face of security problems in its immediate surroundings. Although it cannot be said that the internal balancing carried out by Russia through the military reform that began in 2008 and the reduction in tensions between those powers are necessarily the causes of the conflict that began in 2014, nor of the invasion that began in 2022, it can be said with confidence that those factors created more favorable conditions for Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, which has been manifested since 2014. In this sense, rather than producing equilibrium and stability in accordance with the theories of balancing and balance of power, in unipolarity, balancing is part of a process of systemic change or destabilization.

In addition, it has been argued that a Realist analysis of the war in Ukraine cannot do without a strictly strategic discussion that contributes to an understanding of the choice to use force in February 2022 - and it is clear that discussing the strategic calculation that might inform the decision tells us nothing about the morality or legality (or lack thereof) of the actions. In light of this, it is worth highlighting the strategic importance of the naval base in Sevastopol, located in Crimea. The start of the Russian action in 2014 coincides with developments in Ukraine's internal politics that made compliance with the agreement to use the base less certain. The seizure of Crimea had made Russia's access to Sevastopol more secure and, consequently, Russia's influence in the Black and Mediterranean Seas; control over the Donetski and Luhanski oblasts would guarantee it land access to Crimea, simplifying its logistical problem; control of other areas, particularly in the Zhaporizhzhya and Kherson oblasts, would make it easier for it to protect Crimea and Russia's land corridor to Crimea, giving it greater depth. While it is not possible to say with certainty that these are the goals of the Russian political leadership, nor that these are the only goals, they are

entirely consistent with Russia's need to preserve and eventually increase its capacity for political action beyond its immediate surroundings; in other words, exactly what Mearsheimer's version of Offensive Realism says it should do - regardless of any dissatisfaction, genuine or otherwise, that its leadership may express about NATO expansion. Surprisingly, Mearsheimer's interpretations (2014, 2022) not only contradict his theory (Mearsheimer 2001), but also deny the pertinence and raison d'être of the latter - which, paradoxically, provides much more useful categories for interpreting events, as long as we take into account Russia's strategic situation as a power.

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