

# Canadian Defence Perspectives on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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*Edited by:  
Morgan Olivia Fox*



**Martello  
Papers**

**47**

*Canadian Defence Perspectives on  
Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*

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# *Table of Contents*

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Forward, Morgan Olivia Fox	1
1 Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: An Introduction to the Challenges Facing Canadian Foreign Policy, Benjamin Kurylo	5
2 The Magical Realism of Mearsheimer, Nicholas Donaldson	15
3 Implications for the International Order, Satpal (Raj) Singh Multani	25
4 Weaponizing Gender, Alexandra Burns	31
5 Sex, Power, and Putin, Isobel Anderson	41
Young MINDS: Contributors' Biographies	53



# *Forward*

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*Morgan-Olivia Fox*

Queen's University's Centre for International and Defence Policy (CIDP) is pleased to present the latest in its series of monographs, the Martello Papers. Taking their name from the distinctive towers built during the nineteenth century to defend Kingston, Ontario, these papers cover a wide range of topics in foreign and defence policy, and in the study of international peace and security.

This edition of the Martello Papers is unique in that it showcases contributions from undergraduate and master's level students, who submitted papers to be considered by this publication. This project was further supported by a Department of National Defence Young MINDS Targeted Engagement Grant (TEG), which aims to foster the next generation of defence and security scholars. The TEG focused specifically on showcasing Canadian defence perspectives regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Several things drove me to originally apply for the Young MINDS grant that supported the development and production of this Martello Paper. Foremost, like many of my peers, I was horrified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, then entering its second year, and becoming frustrated by the steadily decreasing news coverage and international attention. Now, with the invasion entering its third year, those sentiments are still true, particularly as US military aid to Ukraine is blocked in Congress. Second, as a fourth-year undergraduate student, I was frustrated by the limited opportunities available for undergraduates to publish in academic circles.

This Martello Paper is the result. I wanted to give my peers (undergraduate

and master's level students) an additional avenue to publish their work, while also contributing to the ongoing academic discussion surrounding the Canadian government's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In particular, I chose to emphasize three topics when soliciting submissions: (1) The role of international organizations (IOs), (2) The importance of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas, and (3) The invasion's implications for great power competition (GPC). I selected these three strands for a few reasons. First, they were areas that I was personally interested in and had the most experience researching, through my work at the CIDP researching NATO's implementation of the WPS agenda and through a previous Young MINDS grant which studied the defence strategies of middle powers. Second, I felt that my peers were uniquely positioned to tackle these subjects. In discussions at the CIDP and in my upper-year seminars, I was repeatedly struck by the insights of my classmates and wanted to use this Martello Paper as an opportunity to further pick their brains.

The submissions in this edited volume are therefore the result of the hard work and diligence of a wealth of individuals, particularly the five contributors.

The first chapter is by Benjamin Kurylo, an undergraduate student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem studying International Relations, and functions as an introduction to the rest of the volume. He offers a sweeping overview of the challenges facing Canadian foreign policy as it relates to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Beginning with the role of various regional and international institutions, including the International Criminal Court and the Arctic Council, Kurylo also explains Canada's unique role in Ukraine as a leader in the WPS and YPS agendas. He also takes time to address how Russia's invasion of Ukraine fits into burgeoning great power competition between the United States and China. Kurylo concludes that Canada's national security strategy is no longer viable.

Next, Nicholas Donaldson, now an MSc student in International Relations and Diplomacy at Leiden University, draws on political theory to better understand the realist scholars who argue that we're currently living through a "New Cold War." He concludes that fear of a resurgence of Cold War tensions between Russia and the United States are being used to justify "rising defence budgets and new intrusive forms of securitization." Moving away from theoretical considerations, Satpal (Raj) Singh Multani, a Master of Public Administration student at the Royal Military College of Canada, spends his chapter assessing risks to Canada that have been exacerbated by Russia's invasion of

Ukraine and making related policy recommendations. He suggests that Canada should embrace idealpolitik as its guiding principle in foreign policy, thus incorporating realistic policy considerations to support the country's ideals.

The final two chapters of this volume focus on the gendered aspects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Alexandra Burns, now a Juris Doctor Candidate at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law, analyzes the Russian state's use of bots on X (formerly Twitter). She found that as part of Russia's information warfare efforts, they disproportionately rely on bots that are made to look like attractive Russian women. Burns concludes that these bots are indicative of both a new form of gender exploitation and an increasingly prevalent form of contemporary warfare. Last, Isobel Anderson, now a Master of Resource and Environmental Management candidate at Dalhousie University, engages in a discourse analysis of President Putin's speeches to assess how militarized masculinities are used by him to legitimize the invasion. By analyzing specific sentences from Putin's speeches shortly before and after the invasion, Anderson argues that Putin's use of gendered narratives has had spill-on consequences, such as the horrific gendered aggression perpetrated by the Russian Army.

As is the case with all Martello Papers, the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Department of National Defence, the CIDP, or any of its supporting agencies.

Most crucially, it is important to keep the discussion on these topics alive. As public attention on Ukraine wanes, researchers can and should play a large role in ensuring that supporting Ukraine remains a key priority of the Canadian government.

I hope you enjoy this Martello Paper and appreciate the effort of its contributors. Additionally, I hope these submissions draw your attention to new ways of considering and responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More than anything, these papers demonstrate the strength of the next generation of Canadian defence and security experts.

*Morgan-Olivia Fox*  
*March 2024*





# *Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: An Introduction to the Challenges Facing Canadian Foreign Policy*

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*Benjamin Kurylo\**

In invading a sovereign nation, Russia deliberately disturbed the United Nations Charter as well the foundations of the international order and placed in a new light the reality of escalating geopolitical tensions. This reality has fashioned a perilous environment for Canadian security. Chrystia Freeland has described Russia's invasion of Ukraine as "the greatest challenge to Canada's national security since the Second World War."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this is an occasion for Canada to reevaluate the shortcomings of its national security apparatus and the functioning of the international order, in order to better prepare itself for this era of growing tensions.

## **The Limits of the International Order**

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the capacity of international organizations (IOs) was put to the test. The UN was hindered by its institutional architecture in its capacity to use coercive actions and impose sanctions. Russia's veto paralyzed the Security Council, revealing a flagrant conflict of interest between

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\*This paper was originally written in French and translated into English.

its responsibility as a permanent member of the Council and its invader status. Moreover, the General Assembly's resolution, which demanded a complete retreat of Russian armed forces, did not have the power to enforce its demands.

In addition, the invasion of Ukraine has revealed—even exacerbated—the growing division of the international community on contentious questions. Indeed, in the first month following the invasion, *The Economist* found that two-thirds of the world's population lived in countries with a neutral or pro-Russian position.<sup>2</sup> In practice, economic strategies seem to be the only reliable strategy to put pressure on Moscow without aggravating the conflict, though only 45 countries have imposed sanctions on Russia at the time of writing.<sup>3</sup> The need for a global reaction that would leave Russia without the ability to continue waging war has not been satisfied.

The war in Ukraine has thus demonstrated the unpredictable nature of the global order, as well as the critical role that nations in the Global South are playing in an increasingly multipolar system. Despite this fact, Western democracies have not yet recognized the strategic importance of the global South in these new circumstances. In Canada, for example, the government has not succeeded in reinforcing existing relations with states in the Global South or in forging new ones, leading to an erosion of its global influence.<sup>4</sup> This diminished role represents a challenge at a moment where violations of international law threaten to become widespread and where it is more crucial than ever to encourage all countries to support the primacy of the established international rules-based order.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has equally constituted a flagrant threat to international law and the organizations that defend it. IOs are the incarnations and defenders of the principles of international law. Canada has thus treated justice as a cornerstone of international peace and security through its participation in the International Criminal Court (ICC). The recent arrest warrants issued by the ICC against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, which Canada has saluted, are excellent illustrations of the importance of IOs in the struggle against criminal atrocities. Although Russia is no longer a member of the ICC, having withdrawn its signature from the Rome Statute in 2016, these arrests signal that those responsible will be held accountable.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has equally been an essential institution through its contributions to international justice initiatives. By way of the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism, it has assessed,

documented, and exposed the violations of international humanitarian law in Ukraine, of which the majority were attributed to Russian forces. As the sixth largest financial contributor to the OSCE, Canada is a key supporter of the organization. Overall, the OSCE's mandate "aligns well with Canada's foreign policy priorities,"<sup>5</sup> in terms of support for rule of law, democracy, and human rights. These institutions are vital in the context of providing a transnational legal framework in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, wherein those guilty of criminal atrocities are held responsible.

In addition, the war in Ukraine has underlined the critical implications for the Arctic Council, Arctic security more generally, and therefore Canadian security. At the time of publication, both Finland and Sweden have officially joined NATO. This means that all members of the Arctic Council (with the exception of Russia) will be members of the alliance. While new guidelines have been agreed upon that will allow the Council's working groups to resume their activities,<sup>6</sup> the governance and the dynamic of the region are in danger of profound transformations. This, paired with Moscow's goal to hamper NATO expansion, foreshadows the emergence of new antagonistic dynamics in the Arctic. This possibility is all the more worrying considering the Canadian Arctic's "vulnerability"<sup>7</sup> and Russia's military reinforcements in the region.<sup>8</sup> According to Bill Matthews, the Deputy Minister of National Defence, "recent events require the government to reassess Canada's role, priorities, and needs" in the region,<sup>9</sup> since a conflict in the Arctic cannot, from now on, be ruled out.

## **Considerations for Women and Youth**

The high stakes for women and young people have been made clear by the war in Ukraine. The majority of the millions of Ukrainians who have fled the country are women and their children.<sup>10</sup> According to the Ukrainian Ministry for Youth, four million young people had already fled the country as of August 2022.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, numerous young Ukrainians have experienced traumatic experiences either in Ukraine or in the process of their flight, which will have severe repercussions on their long-term mental health.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, the conflict has had profound implications for the WPS and YPS agendas, which were created by UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 2250 to respond to the disproportionate impact armed conflicts have on women and youth and recognize their essential role in peacebuilding.

Canada's ambassador for WPS, Jacqueline O'Neill, has emphasized that the mass displacement of women and children from Ukraine is accompanied by needs and risks which must be recognized.<sup>13</sup> These statements have been echoed in Canada's response to the invasion. Indeed, emergency authorizations were provided by Canada to facilitate the entry and residency of Ukrainians in Canada. Moreover, in addition to the \$320 million of humanitarian aid provided since January 2022, Canada has allocated \$35 million to Ukrainian government institutions and civil society organizations in their efforts to provide support to vulnerable Ukrainians, in particular women.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the YPS agenda, the situation in Ukraine offers an undeniable example of the importance of youth in resolving conflicts and maintaining peace. The European Youth Parliament's initiatives to encourage collaboration between young Ukrainians and Europeans, the humanitarian funding from the Ukrainian Youth Association in Canada, and UNICEF's UPSHIFT program in Ukraine—which develops projects to aid communities overcome the effects of the war—are but a few examples of the impact youth can have in reestablishing peace. Domestically, the Canadian Coalition for YPS has made a substantial contribution to keeping the agenda at the forefront of political and public attention, by presenting recommendations, organizing conferences, and establishing relations with representatives in government, civil society, and bodies at the United Nations.

Canada has equally recognized that the psychological supports displaced young Ukrainians are receiving will influence their ability to cope with recent traumatic experiences. As a result, Canada has made considerable efforts to provide mental health care for Ukrainian immigrants, with help from volunteers, public hospitals, and charities. Moreover, in the process of promoting collective action and inclusive politics, Canada has favoured partnerships with youth organizations as part of its plan to improve multilateralism in peace and security issues.<sup>15</sup> The actions of youth in the context of the invasion have thus been a catalyst in encouraging and inciting states to continue according youth more importance in decision-making.

## **A New Era of Great Power Competition**

Putin has stated that the rivalry between the United States and Russia provoked the “special military operation” in Ukraine. Alongside the occupation

and destruction of Ukraine, the invasion is also aiming to prevent NATO's expansion to Russia's borders. This aligns with Putin's view that NATO is nothing more "than an instrument of American foreign policy" which promotes a "hostile, anti-Russia" agenda.<sup>16</sup> While these statements are part of a larger disinformation campaign to justify Putin's ambition to resuscitate the *Russkii Mir*, it is still a clear illustration of the global implications of the invasion of Ukraine. A notable example of these implications is great power competition.

Considering America's commitment to "make Russia's war on Ukraine a strategic failure,"<sup>17</sup> Finland's NATO membership, the declaration that Ukraine will join NATO after the war,<sup>18</sup> and the military alliance's growing presence on its eastern borders, the war has been counter-productive for Vladimir Putin. This has paved the way for lasting tensions between Russia and the United States. Moscow's suspension of its participation in the New START treaty in February 2023 is already an example of the return to a Cold War-style mentality between the two countries. While Russia has not withdrawn from the treaty, Moscow has said that a replacement for New START is unlikely following its expiration in early 2026, considering the damage done to bilateral trust and cooperation.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine is occurring in the context of growing competition between the United States and China. It is concerning that China leans in favour of Russia, with Xi Jinping declaring a limitless friendship between the two powers.<sup>19</sup> Beijing has supported Russia economically by reinforcing commercial ties with Moscow, defiant of Western efforts to weaken the Russian war machine. Contrary to predictions, Russia has been able to mitigate the effects of the sanctions and avoid a severe crisis in 2022. This can be explained by Russia's strategy to reorient oil exports away from Europe and towards countries that do not support sanctions.<sup>20</sup> China, which represents 40 percent of current Russian crude oil exports, thus surpassed the European Union in June 2022 as the main importer.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, China has placed itself as an obstacle to Western efforts to put an end to Russian military activities in Ukraine.

Moreover, China has been considered one of the principal beneficiaries of the conflict. Beijing has exploited the invasion to advance its own agenda, as depicted in the joint declaration between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Russian Federation, where they underlined their ambition for the "transformation of the global governance architecture and world order."<sup>22</sup> China has benefited economically, through cheap Russian energy, which has

pulled its economy out of a slowdown, as well as geopolitically, through the shift in international attention from the Asia Pacific towards Eastern Europe.

As warned by NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg, so long as the war continues, “Beijing is watching closely. And learning lessons that may influence its future decisions. What is happening in Europe today could happen in East Asia tomorrow.”<sup>23</sup> Retaking control in Taiwan reflects China’s desire to be the dominant world power. With the West focusing its attention and resources on Ukraine, Beijing may be able to take advantage of a unique opportunity in its policy towards Taiwan. This was demonstrated during an April 2023 Chinese military exercise, which consisted of encircling Taiwan. The exercises started after the return of President Tsai Ing-wen from a trip to the United States, again underlining Beijing’s competition with Washington for regional hegemony.

## **Conclusion**

In light of the troubling resurgence of competition between great powers in the international sphere, a new global strategic, military, and geopolitical thinking is required, especially for Canada. Indeed, Canada’s national security strategy is no longer viable.<sup>24</sup> Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has revitalized dynamics of antagonistic politics, threatening Western values and interests and increasing the possibility of hostilities against NATO. At the same time, the CPP’s acerbic behaviour emphasizes the larger long-term problem of China.

In this shifting international environment where authoritarianism is on the rise and democracy is weakening globally,<sup>25</sup> China and Russia continue to represent a serious threat to Canada and its allies through their interference, cyberattacks, espionage, and their challenges to the global order. As a result, this reality supplies a prism through which to examine Canada’s perspectives and address any national security gaps.

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## *The Magical Realism of Mearsheimer*

### *Post-Structuralist Analysis of Realist Delusions and the “New Cold War”*

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*Nicholas Donaldson*

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has stretched global supply chains and energy sovereignty to their limits. It has tested the (in)ability of international institutions to confront imperialist aggression, even within the Security Council itself. The war also prompted shifts in the scholastic debate on Great Power competition. Realists have been fast to claim the war vindicates their literature on power maximizing, the global state of anarchy, and a coming great power conflict akin to the Cold War. I suggest that the continued overstatement of a new Cold War obscures ongoing geopolitical shifts while supporting the reassertion of American nationalism within traditional international relations (IR) frameworks of bipolar competition between great powers. At the forefront of this shift has been one scholar: John Mearsheimer. A prominent structural realist, Mearsheimer favours a simplistic construction of bipolar competition, taking the new Cold War as a foregone conclusion within a world of anarchic interest-maximizing great powers.

Great power politics remains important as a dimension of analysis. However, aspects of the current world system are obscured by traditional analyses of IR, which find their genesis in the core assumptions of realism. They transpose or project antiquated models of the Cold War onto new terrains of diplomatic, economic, political, social, and military competition. The focus of this chapter will be restricted to scholarly, professional, and public discourse on

the Russo-Ukrainian war, with particular attention to the work of Mearsheimer and structural realism which has dominated public and policy discourse. Drawing upon post-structuralism, I will discuss how the invasion has opened space for the construction of an American foreign policy oriented around the new Cold War, while erasing historical facts and demonizing an outside enemy to legitimize this construction of a militaristic US identity and policy.

## **Post-Structuralism & Lene Hansen**

Scholars, beginning with Robert Cox,<sup>1</sup> described a division between normative critical theories of IR which seek to transform the world around them and problem-solving theories of IR which claim to some facsimile of descriptive objectivity.<sup>2</sup> While these divisions are overstated, they have formed ideological fault lines which can offer some clarity.

For post-structuralists, language is everything. Nothing holds value outside the meaning we ascribe to the material world, which grounds our understanding of the ideational.<sup>3</sup> They are co-constitutive. Foreign policy relies on representations of identity, which are constituted by practices and expressions of foreign policy in discourses. Foreign policies draw upon representations of identity for their institutionalization and legitimacy. They are tied to identity as “discursive, political, relational, and social,” or constructed through discourse in relation to something that it is not.<sup>4</sup> In relation to discourses on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, media pundits, policy wonks, and public opinion are vital to the articulation and justification of identity and foreign policy.

The collective nature of discourses as a terrain makes it conceptually unstable and constantly in realignment, leaving it open to oppositional discourses from “political forces, media, academe, and popular culture” which may challenge or contravene official discourses of authority.<sup>5</sup> In response, they can acknowledge and accommodate new facts to pre-existing discourses, shift discursive frames, or reject facts outright. Hansen describes security as a “historically formed discourse centered on the nation-state... a form of identity construction with a distinct political force that invests political leaders with power as well as responsibility.”<sup>6</sup>

This elucidates how foreign policy articulated in texts makes possible institutional responses and produces spaces for co-action. Here, texts refer to written academic work, policy reports, as well as speeches, public opinion sur-

veys, and media coverage. Hansen discusses the necessity of the selection of key texts which both reflects the temporality of the discussion and its historical genealogy.<sup>7</sup> For this article's purposes, I have selected key texts from Mearsheimer, foreign policy realists, and their detractors on the invasion. This illustrates the ideational forces which structural realists manipulate to articulate American foreign policy and identity in relation to the newest foreign enemy which demands and legitimizes militarization: a Russo-Chinese alliance in the new Cold War.

## **Realism, Mearsheimer, and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine**

Realism is one of the foundations of IR. Consequently, it is caricatured by its critics, made worse by the prominent realists like Stephen Walt, John Mearsheimer, or Paul Poast to present structural realism as the "monolithic theory" of IR.<sup>8</sup> Baylis et al. argue realists subscribe to three beliefs.<sup>9</sup> One, statism describes states as the primary unitary actors in anarchic competition for power with other states. Second, each pursues their survival, whether through maximizing security, accumulating forms of capital, or power as an end, which confers an "ethic of responsibility" upon its leaders to make hard calls on ethically ambiguous or immoral acts.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, there is no higher authority in the international system. Security is guaranteed through self-help, meaning states can only rely on themselves to guarantee sovereignty. One's security often comes at the cost of another's insecurity, giving rise to a "security dilemma."<sup>11</sup>

Realism remains a dominant frame in public discourse and foreign policy circles.<sup>12, 13</sup> Smith & Dawson are correct to caution scholars against caricature or depicting realism as monolithic. However, one cannot ignore Mearsheimer's dominance within the discourse.<sup>14</sup> In 2014, during the Russian invasion of Crimea and the Donbas, structural realists were fast to lecture on the anarchic state of the system and the West's culpability for the military ambitions of a would-be imperial power.<sup>15</sup> Mearsheimer argues NATO and EU enlargement, Ukrainian democratization, and the threat of Western invasion to Russia were the primary causes of the political crisis in Crimea and the Donbas.<sup>16</sup>

Mearsheimer's position, while controversial, remains enduring in the field and has resonated with policymakers. Trump and Biden oversaw historic retreats from internationalism in spite of popular support for Ukraine, with Trump overseeing a historic *détente* with Putin.<sup>17</sup> Policymakers remained timid

in the face of active aggression from a budding regional hegemon, allowing the Russian government to engineer the invasion in 2014 and the illegitimate undemocratic referenda.<sup>18</sup> A new “principled realism” has come to be articulated within official US government documents on foreign policy “guided by outcomes, not ideology.”<sup>19</sup>

Since the resurgence of hostilities in 2022, Mearsheimer has doubled down on his position, insisting on the West’s guilt and the threat of China looming in the background.<sup>20</sup> Media pundits and pop academics were swift to follow suit, seeking to validate realist theories.<sup>21</sup> However, this group is notably smaller in 2022,<sup>22</sup> with Mearsheimer taking the lead in opposition to popular support. Mearsheimer had previously predicted that Ukraine was of “no strategic value” to the US and sought to turn its attention.<sup>23</sup>

In light of Putin’s ambition and US/EU support, structural realism has failed to adequately capture the invasion’s effects on multiple dimensions of security beyond “basic—largely common-sense—insights.”<sup>24</sup> It lacks adequate frameworks to explain the war’s ideational or psychological dimensions,<sup>25</sup> ignorant of historical facts, small and large actors’ agency, and their cultural or political conditions.<sup>26</sup> It makes irrational assumptions about the presumed rationality of actors (Putin, Biden, etc.) or actions (US or EU aid, etc.) and Russian military capability.<sup>27</sup> When tested, Mearsheimer and colleagues often bend, offering explanations which diverge in part or whole from their theoretical grounding.<sup>28</sup>

Critics have been quick to assail his choice of language, passively pro-Russian stance, and historical revisionism.<sup>29</sup> Anne Applebaum speculated whether American academics “provided the narrative,” justifying Russian “greed and imperialism” while outcries from across the spectrum resisted treating Ukraine as an “unfortunate casualty.”<sup>30</sup> But explanation does not equate to moral justification, and Mearsheimer’s work “naturalize[s] their power claims and their tendency to violence” into “law-like” systems.<sup>31</sup> These oppositional discourses have been dismissed as foolish virtuous liberals doing more harm than good. As Tooze states, Mearsheimer has fashioned himself as “speak[ing] truth to power and the public.” Fewer have questioned its underlying motives or sought to situate his political project within the context of his beliefs of US foreign policy on China. The Russo-Ukrainian war embodies what some believe to be a renewed geopolitical rivalry between East and West.<sup>32</sup>

Mearsheimer’s use of fault justifies continued militarization, alongside the pursuit of a new Cold War. It constructs and legitimizes American foreign

policy and identity against the rising challenge of a Russo-Chinese alliance. Russia is not seen as a threat, but a potential ally, enemy, or neutral player in “containing a rising China.”<sup>33</sup> Mearsheimer had dismissed Russia as a “weak great power” with “no chance” to become a regional hegemon, to have strong military capabilities, and limited defensive ambitions.<sup>34</sup> His colleagues now must confront their dismissal of Ukrainian democracy as a necessary casualty of their miscalculation for Putin’s ambitions. Discursively, they are able to confront this challenge by accommodating these into classical IR narratives. The Russo-Ukrainian war therefore became an opportunity for realists to re-affirm bipolarity and a conservative stability in the interstate system, via the re-assertion of Cold War competition.

## **The Magical Realism of Mearsheimer: Constructing a Cold War**

New foreign policy objectives for the US in Ukraine are articulated through the lens of addressing the rising threat of China and their coalition partners in the new Cold War. These are grounded in the construction of the US identity as a declining hegemon in need of re-establishment to rise to combat the “potential threat” of China.<sup>35</sup> Most controversially, they locate guilt for the current political crisis with the West and its leaders’ wanton disregard for Putin’s power-maximizing, demanding neutral spheres of influence to re-assert the balance of powers or emergence of hegemonic competition. In short, they transpose old Cold War frameworks to continue a long-term project of militarization and global competition, made possible through the articulation and legitimation of US identities and foreign policy in discourse.

Mearsheimer has long made his perspective clear. He believes China is a “rising hegemon” trying to “push the US out of East Asia” amid US decline.<sup>36</sup> To Mearsheimer, the US’s involvement in the war does two things: (1) mires them in unnecessary and strategically unimportant military efforts, and (2) drives a wedge between Russia and the West, towards China. Both Mearsheimer and his colleagues revel in the “intense security competition between the US and China” which will come to pass “with the serious possibility of real shooting.”<sup>37</sup> Think tanks, like the Heritage Foundation, have published hour-long reports on “Winning the New Cold War”<sup>38</sup> while Matthew Kroenig, VP of the Atlantic Council’s Scowcroft Centre, forewarns of a “great power war”



between the US and China.<sup>39</sup> Like Covid-19, it is difficult to disentangle this militaristic fearmongering from genuine concern with China's foreign policy and Sinophobia.<sup>40</sup>

The media appears in lockstep with the state department and their foreign policy advisors, regardless of whether they align with realists' prescriptions. Magazines like *The Economist* or *Foreign Policy* preach of a new Cold War as an ideological and political battleground for the future of the free world.<sup>41</sup> Commentators at Foreign Affairs have declared the subject "no longer debatable."<sup>42</sup> Both the Republican and Democratic parties in the US have made anti-China rhetoric, pioneered by the Trump administration, a keystone policy of the party.<sup>43</sup> These range from opposing Huawei's expansion to countering influence in Taiwan and the South China Sea. It is the bipartisan reigning logic of American politics. Developments have been mirrored in Canada, but other states have been slow to take interests or pick sides in any civilizational conflict.<sup>44</sup> Structural realism as a dominant discourse has attempted to manufacture consent for the new Cold War, constructing both identity and foreign policy in reference to the existential threat posed by China's growing economic dominance.

## Conclusion: There is No New Cold War

Comparisons are designed to offer analytical clarity. A reassertion of Cold War ideology does not offer any analytical clarity, but rather obscures its complexity beneath ideologically driven militarism and global competition. The Cold War was an economic, ideological, and military competition between global powers who bifurcated the world and sought to isolate their respective hemispheres over the very nature of modernity. As is noted by a number of commentators, there are vast differences between then and now. To transpose theoretical insights from the Cold War without attention to these is to engage in the unscholarly pursuit of ahistorical research. The Russo-Ukrainian War for realists has acted merely as an opportunity to further this political project.

Over a quarter of Western citizens believe the coming global order will be defined by two polar blocs led by China and the US.<sup>45</sup> A majority of Europeans already believe the new Cold War has begun, though they also believe they have little part in it.<sup>46</sup> These are glimpses of a realist future predominated by militarization and hegemonic competition. Current events validate Cynthia

Enloe's thesis that the Cold War never truly ended and is defined by the "densely woven web of relationships and attitudes that have sustained not only large and lethal militaries, but ideas about enemies, and rivalries."<sup>47</sup> Consequently, militarism persists under the ideological justification of a new Cold War. Rising defence budgets and new intrusive forms of securitization are legitimized under the newfound threat of a Russia-China alliance. The Cold War analogy "distorts and simplifies" what are complex dynamics within an emerging system of intra-core competition between regimes of accumulation.<sup>48</sup> It acts to justify astronomical defence spending precipitating multiple crises of human security. It constructs a narrative of apologism and fear about the hollow shell of a great power, made all the more transparent by their continued military defeats. This specific construction of identity, reliant on fearmongering of the Other in dominant discourses of *structural realism*, legitimizes militaristic foreign policies in the newest Cold War arms race. While it is the current reigning orthodoxy of foreign policy, that does not guarantee its permanence.

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## *Implications for the International Order*

### *Considering Canadian Foreign Policy and Great Power Competition*

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*Satpal (Raj) Singh Multani*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine raises questions regarding the strategic rationale behind President Putin's decision, especially during a global pandemic. President Putin attributed the invasion of Ukraine "demilitarization and denazification."<sup>1</sup> Although experts have different opinions on why Putin invaded Ukraine, they all agree that several factors played a role. One such factor is the historical ties between the two nations, which ultimately fueled Putin's ideological ambition of restoring the historic power of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the enlargement of NATO and the rise of Western democracy have become major geopolitical issues for Russia.<sup>3</sup> These factors can be grouped under the umbrella of Putin's aims to attain economic, political, and influence-based power.

In the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the impact on innocent civilians remains a grave concern. Many countries, including Canada, have provided humanitarian and military assistance to support Ukraine in addressing the crisis.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the conflict persists with no clear end. In this context, this chapter explores Canadian perspectives regarding Russia's invasion and potential implications for the global order.

### **Efficacy of International Organizations**

The international response to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has

been mixed. Some organizations, like the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), have taken actions to limit Russia's abilities and put pressure on Putin's government. Despite this, the effectiveness of these actions has been questioned as the conflict continues. Reports have emerged suggesting that Russia's allies, including China, Iran, and Belarus, are providing significant economic and military support.<sup>5</sup> While the EU has imposed substantial sanctions and banned the import of Russian oil, it has not imposed similar measures on Russian gas. Furthermore, 59 percent of countries have not condemned or counteracted Russia's actions and have instead prioritized maintaining relations and promoting trade with Russia.<sup>6</sup>

International organizations (IOs) have been primarily focused on mitigating the conflict to prevent a further escalation. The legal and diplomatic efforts of IOs have arguably not been very effective in de-escalating the conflict, but they have set a contemporary precedent for the role of nation states and IOs as external actors in armed conflicts. For example, NATO, the EU, and the Council of Europe have taken more intensive measures. NATO nations have been providing military or humanitarian support, while the EU has imposed sanctions.

There are two primary purposes to these pro-Ukrainian responses from IOs. The first is to weaken Putin's power as much as possible to end the war and open a path for dialogue, ultimately leading to de-escalation and diplomacy. The second goal is to mitigate any potential fallout from the conflict. Recent actions by world leaders have shown the potential for fully integrating Ukraine into the West following the war. Many experts agree that Ukraine will need significant support to rebuild after the conflict. Some have referred to this as a twenty-first century Marshall Plan,<sup>7</sup> with the prime ministers of Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland calling for the "confiscation of Russian assets and reserves, which are estimated at \$350 billion to \$400 billion in the West. These funds could, and should, be used for the postwar reconstruction of Ukraine."<sup>8</sup> However, it is worth noting that this proposition—if implemented—could cause long-term anti-Western sentiments in Russia. It is therefore imperative to consider the potential impact on the Russian population and avoid policies that create more hostility. IOs need to weaken Putin's regime while also considering the aftermath. They should thus implement policies that will help repair and stabilize Ukraine without punishing the Russian population. Finding the right balance will be a central and critical part of the peace negotiations.

## China's Role

Amidst Russia's invasion of Ukraine, another conflict of immense significance for the future is simmering—the rivalry between the United States and China. Rapidly escalating tensions over trade, technological advancements, and conflicting foreign policies have resulted in discord between the two countries. Russia has become a secondary player in this power struggle.<sup>9</sup> Some people refer to these tensions as the “New Cold War,” but this is not entirely accurate. The Cold War was an ideological conflict, while the competition between the US and China is focused more on economic and geopolitical issues.<sup>10</sup>

China operates under a form of state capitalism where the Communist Party of China (CCP) exerts rigorous control while allowing for capitalist incentives. However, the emphasis must be placed on the term “allow.” If a corporation does not follow CCP rules or goes against its principles, the CCP will take steps to enforce compliance. To put it simply, China has been looking diligently into Putin's mistakes since the invasion to adapt its approach to be more successful and pragmatic in the Asia-Pacific. This means that China's actions are not necessarily motivated by ideology, but rather by a desire for expansion and influence. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is a competitor, not an enemy. As a result, “it is possible for the United States to pursue the establishment of a cooperative relationship with China.”<sup>11</sup>

Both China and the United States want to avoid a direct conflict with each other. Their current economic relationship does not incentivize them to become enemies anytime soon. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine did result in an increase in tension between China and the United States. Disagreements over TikTok, Chinese spy balloons, semiconductors, and Taiwan's sovereignty will only continue to exacerbate Chinese-American relations. Considering these tensions, it is evident that there are some elements of the Cold War present. Nevertheless, it is merely a surface-level analysis that brings to mind a new Cold War. China is not focused on promoting its ideological system globally, but economic growth and expansion. Consequently, China is willing to foster trade and development relationships with other nations as long as it serves its central ambition of growing its expansion and influence. In other words, it aims to become the leading global power, as the United States has been.



## Policy Recommendations for Canada

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia is rooted in divergent perspectives and ambitions of various individuals who seek to reshape history and wield power on their own terms. This conflict is not only a manifestation of Ukraine's struggle but also a reflection of the underlying factors that will shape history. As such, two distinct conflicts are at play here: between Russia and Ukraine and between China and the United States, both of which have implications for the world order. Consequently, Canada's foreign policy should prioritize peacekeeping efforts and continue to support Ukraine and the United States.

Canada's focus on geopolitical diplomacy is centred on promoting liberal democracy and the rule of law, aligning with our allies' shared values. It is therefore crucial for Canada to support Ukraine's pursuit of sovereignty and democracy. Therefore, Canada must prioritize global stability, use diplomacy to prevent further conflicts and inject rationality into discussions.

While historical context is vital in understanding the impact of ideology on foreign policy, it is essential to recognize that Canadians support Ukraine based on shared values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. From Canada's perspective, this conflict is about Ukrainians fighting for their ideals. While *realpolitik* has been the dominant approach in foreign policy, it is time to consider the underlying motivations behind nations' support for specific objectives. As such, Canada should embrace a form of foreign policy that combines elements of idealism and realism, known as *idealpolitik*. Canada's approach should incorporate realistic policy considerations while clearly defining objectives and ideals and prioritizing efforts toward rebuilding society in peace.

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# *Weaponizing Gender*

## *Gender and Russian Propaganda Bots*

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*Alexandra Burns*

The term propaganda became associated with manipulation in the twentieth century. Propaganda posters and messages on the radio were commonplace during both world wars. The goal was for states to wage a successful war of persuasion. Since the advent of social media, states' propaganda has taken on a whole new platform to propagate ideas. The term information warfare has been aptly applied to this new situation, as, while the space be virtual, a war of persuasion is being waged. Russia has become particularly adept at engaging in information warfare using social media propaganda. While it would be fascinating to analyze the entirety of Russia's propaganda machine, this chapter will narrow its focus to Russian state-run X (formerly Twitter) bots. More specifically, it considers how gender has been used by the Russian state's propaganda machine to legitimize Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The sexualization of women is being weaponized by the Russian state via the use of X bots that are made to look like they belong to attractive Russian women. Through this strategy, Russia aims to legitimize its invasion. In addition, Russia has found that viewers on social media, especially North African and Middle Eastern men, are more susceptible to misinformation when it is from accounts represented by attractive women.

## **An Introduction to Information Warfare**

To examine Russia's use of attractive women as bots, it is necessary to first understand how the overarching Russian propaganda machine functions. Due to Russia's secretive nature when it comes to its government, it is difficult to identify this in detail. Research suggests that the Russian propaganda machine is made up of all the successor institutions of the Committee for State Security, more commonly known as the KGB. These institutions include the Federal Security Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service and the Federal Protective Service. These organizations all partake in creating and perpetuating propaganda. Also, the Russian state owns companies such as Sputnik, a radio and television broadcasting corporation, that dispense propaganda.<sup>1</sup>

Since the popularization of the internet and social media, Russia, like many other states, has expanded its propaganda tactics further into the virtual world.<sup>2</sup> This has caused analysts to determine that a new type of warfare is being waged, aptly called "information warfare." Sergei Shoigu, the Russian Minister of Defence stated in a speech that Russia has established "cyber warriors" and has established a "new form of military consisting of information warfare troops."<sup>3</sup> The cyber world has helped create the post-truth world wherein it is incredibly difficult to identify what is true. This difficulty is caused by poor and false reporting being spread, alongside manipulated photos and videos. This is the perfect breeding ground for propaganda and bots. Jarred Pier argues that "social media creates a point of injection for propaganda and has become the nexus of information operations and cyber warfare."<sup>4</sup> He describes how whole groups of bots are created to manufacture and perpetuate narratives in cyber space. Russia specifically employs this tactic on X. The state creates bots to appeal specifically to the audience it is trying to reach. Importantly, while bots are not actual people, it takes a well-coordinated team of real people that understand effective propaganda techniques needed to run a bot campaign.<sup>5</sup> Evidently, Russia has found that female bots appeal to a specific audience and uses them to push specific narratives.

### **Evidence: Attractive Female X Bots**

Unfortunately, the field of international relations in general has largely failed to take a gendered perspective. This has been changing in recent years;

however, research is still sorely lacking, especially on the topic of gender and information warfare. This chapter seeks to help address this issue by examining how gender been used by the Russian state on the X (formerly Twitter) propaganda machine to legitimize Russian foreign policy decisions, since February 24, 2022, when the invasion of Ukraine began. Fortunately, some research has already been done in this space by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). They found that the bot accounts were successful in spreading pro-Russian propaganda on social media to accounts owned by men; success being defined by number of followers and comments on the propaganda posts.<sup>6</sup> ISD also coined the term “propaganda priming” to explain Russia’s tactic of using these images of women.<sup>7</sup>

Essentially, the creators of the bots take images of Russian women and use them for the profile photo associated with an X account. It is essential to note that this is a form of exploitation, since these images are of real women, with real lives and feelings. These Russian women have not consented to the use of their images, nor do they have any control over what the accounts say. While this chapter focuses on the use of these bots to justify the invasion, it is also important to acknowledge the individual harm the bots are causing to these women, regardless of whether they are aware of them.

The X account with the username *@lmylrw9* is one example of these bot accounts. It has approximately twenty-thousand followers at the time of writing. The account’s biography states that the woman in the profile image space is a “Russian war correspondent,” [Figure 1].<sup>8</sup> However, when one searches the profile photo using the Google Reverse Image search feature, photos of a Russian woman named Elena Deligioz appear. Her actual occupation is listed as “model,” and she has no history of war reporting. To further cement the narrative that this bot account belongs to a Russian woman, the Russian flag is the background image on the account. These bots are made with the express purpose of spreading Russian propaganda. For instance, *@lmylrw9* tweeted “Russia will teach America a lesson that it is not the only one qualified to lead the world,” on April 2, 2023 [Figure 2]. Importantly, it was originally posted in Arabic. The post was viewed approximately 2,000 times.

As well, ISD highlighted two bots that its research uncovered. The first X account is called *@mariaraskolinov* and had 11,000 followers at the time of writing [Figure 3]. In her bio, Maria states that she is an “Editor in the Arab press Department of the Russian sputnik\_ar agency.”<sup>9</sup> This is then repeated in

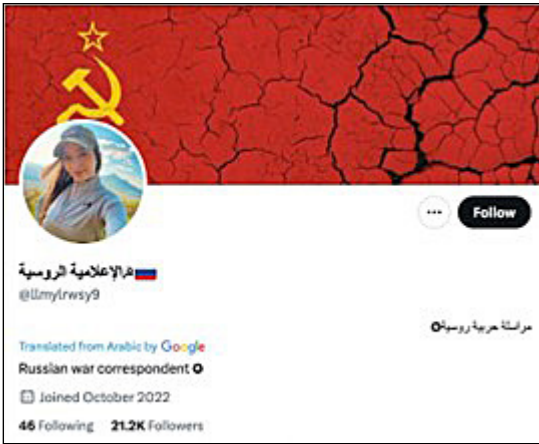


Figure 1



Figure 2

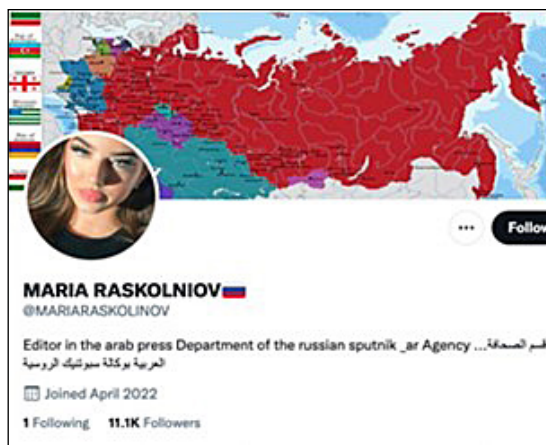


Figure 3



Figure 4



Arabic. The bot was created in April 2022, and has since been banned on X. Again, when the icon image is reverse searched, the woman's name is found to be Dzana, a social media influencer. The account background is a map of Russia [Figure 3]. Unfortunately, this account was taken down; however, ISD did include a photo of another bot's propaganda post. This bot account is called @ElenaKosogrov, and similarly posts in Arabic [Figure 4]. Like the other accounts, the profile image and name do not match a real person. On March 17, 2022, this bot posted the following statement in Arabic: "Urgent: Britain's mission to the United Nations: Russia's war in Ukraine is a threat to al of us. What kind of interests are under threat? It seems that in Ukraine you used to have biological laboratories like America," [Figure 4].<sup>10</sup> This tweet was liked 573 times and retweeted 59 times.

This tactic is not new: "Rather than soothing voices on the radio in familiar dialects the Arabic pro-Kremlin X women shilling for Russia are doing so with voices appealing to denizens of social media platforms. The accounts are selling propaganda with sex appeal, a strategy that has a longer history than can be recounted..."<sup>11</sup> The 10 accounts found by the ISD on X had a combined total of 359,075 followers. While the multitude of men following these accounts may be doing so because they are linked to attractive women rather than their focus on Russia, they will still be exposed to their posts, and thus, without necessarily seeking it, these men are taking in Russian propaganda. These bots demonstrate how the sexualization of women is being weaponized by the Russian state's social media propaganda machine via the use of bots on X.

## Theoretical Analysis

A counterargument to this chapter could be that Russia is simply using attractive women to appeal to men because men like attractive women and are more likely to listen to them. This argument is not wrong; however, it is overly simplistic. The fact that the ISD found that these bots are specifically spreading propaganda in Arabic, and not English or any other Western language, indicates that Russia has specifically picked up on a trend of propaganda reception in the Middle East. This then begs the question of why these Middle Eastern men, who are the main followers and interactors on these bot accounts are particularly susceptible to these bots. To better understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to apply post-colonial theory.

Post-colonial theory focuses on the power relations that are a legacy of the colonial age. It goes beyond the idea that Western colonizer states are now entirely equal in the way they engage with other states, and looks at how colonization frames inter-state engagement in the contemporary world.<sup>12</sup> Post-colonial theory helps explain the overarching way in which Russia views itself in relation to the rest of the world, which is necessary for explaining how Russia goes about justifying its foreign policy decisions.<sup>13</sup> Russia is unique in terms of foreign policy analysis because it holds both the identity of a subaltern state and a colonizing state. In relation to the West, Russia frames itself as a subaltern state because of its economic dependence on the West and because this identity helps it frame itself as different and superior in its “near-abroad,” despite it claiming to be repressed. While holding onto this subaltern identity, Russia simultaneously acts as a great power in relation to the Middle East, where it has a legacy of colonization. Russia is also deeply integrated economically with the Middle East through arms, oil, and food trade.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Russia is a complex case in terms of foreign policy analysis, and post-colonial theory greatly aids in unravelling its multi-layered identity.

It is easy for Western political analysts to fall into the habit of framing Russia only in terms of its relationship with the West, however, Russia’s geography means that it straddles Asia, the Middle East and West, forcing it to contend with the political dynamics in each of these regions. David Lewis, author of *The Role of Ideology in Russian Foreign Policy* uses the term “Eurasianism” to describe this unique position. He says this term represents the “idea that a Russia-centred space from Eastern Europe to Western China constitutes an alternative civilizational space distinct from Europe.”<sup>15</sup> Using the term Eurasianism and post-colonial analysis makes it easier to specifically understand why Russia is reducing its women to their beauty for propaganda bot campaigns.

Post-colonial theory explains that subaltern states further repress “the other” in the social hierarchy, including, but not limited to women. Morozov writes that “the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous’ and thus silences the voices of ‘the other subject,’ in particular of subaltern women.”<sup>16</sup> Those in charge further oppress vulnerable citizens, to create and maintain the power that is left. Beginning in the nineteenth century Russia’s imperial project became defined by gendered narratives wherein the colonizer was masculine, and the colonized subjects were feminine, in order to disempower the colonized.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in the past few years the situation for women in

Russia has worsened; gendered violence, employment discrimination, and the siloing of women into traditional roles have all increased.<sup>18</sup> Because Russia frames itself as a subaltern state in relation to the West, it feels the need to rebel by espousing “traditional” values, such as the idea that women should be limited to the roles of mothers and wives. While these are traditional values, they have the ironic effect of sexualizing women as their value is reduced to their beauty and reproductive ability.

Essentially, Russia weaponizes gender to differentiate itself from the West. This tactic can also be viewed through the lens of Russia’s identity as a colonizer in relation to the Middle East. These same values appeal to these states due to the colonization that, in part, helped create the conditions of very poor gender equality that is framed around concepts of traditional femininity. Thus, Russia behaves as both a subaltern and colonizer in its use of Russian attractive women bots, as it seeks to rebel against the West, and specifically appeal to Arabic speaking men in the Middle East to galvanize support in these territories. Using post-colonial theory this chapter further demonstrates that Russia is weaponizing gender as a propaganda tactic to galvanize support for the invasion of Ukraine.

## **Solutions**

This segues into the larger issue of media literacy. An educated user could easily spot that these accounts are fake with a quick Google search. However, states are aware that media literacy is seriously lacking among many social media users. This is why they use bots—because they know that they can persuade a population to believe false narratives. To see this, one must only look to the Russian propaganda information warfare tactics used during the 2016 American presidential election, wherein approximately 50,000 Twitter accounts were found to contain Russia bots.<sup>19</sup> In order for bots to work, the real accounts (meaning associated with and owned by real people) must actively interact and share the propaganda the bots are creating. Thus, the success of the bots is reliant on poor media literacy. Solving this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is a core solution in preventing the propaganda being pushed by the Russian state’s use of bots. X also has a responsibility to filter out fake accounts. In practice though, this is a large and difficult task because, so long as these bots do not call for violence or share other violent imagery, they do not easily trigger a response by X’s moderating teams.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the sexualization of women is being weaponized by the Russian state's social media propaganda machine via the use of X bots made to look like they belong to attractive Russian women, and to legitimize foreign policy decisions related to the invasion of Ukraine. While the scope of this chapter is narrow, it identifies the larger pressing international security issue of information warfare and delves into the specific narratives and tactics that Russia is using to justify the invasion of Ukraine. Gone are the days of wars being waged on radio and television. Now, states have essentially continuous access to people across the world in their homes via their phones, computers, and tablets. This access should be recognized as a serious threat. Furthermore, this chapter addresses the gendered aspects of international relations that are too often ignored. A new avenue of gender exploitation has opened with the advent of social media and poses a threat to the mental and physical health of women. One cannot forget that these bots are being created with the images of women and are creating and perpetuating the narrative that it is acceptable to reduce women to their beauty. This process of dehumanization is a dangerous act and should also be recognized as a threat. The act of dehumanizing women is one of the first and major warning signs that a state is slipping into authoritarianism.<sup>21</sup>

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## *Sex, Power, and Putin*

### *A Discourse Analysis of Militarized Masculinities and the Legitimation of War*

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*Isobel Anderson*

President Putin's "special military operation" in Ukraine catapulted the region into a brutal and unprovoked full-scale war. Russia's rationalization for the invasion is nuanced, with centuries of historical imperialism and power hierarchies at play, requiring a theoretical questioning of established geopolitical narratives. The following chapter seeks to explore the potential for the application of non-traditional international relations (IR) theories when examining the role that Putin's masculinized and sexualized political and social discourse is playing in Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Putin's manipulation of gendered, essentialist, and sexualized narratives within Russian public discourse, which promote Russia's national power while devaluing and effeminizing the "Other" (Ukraine), has legitimized the Kremlin's imperial ambitions and aggression in Ukraine. The following framework will first establish a theoretical foundation, drawing primarily from feminist IR theory and postcolonial theory. This contribution seeks to analyze the discourse of the Russian president within the context of the invasion, provide insights into how Putin's gendered narrative of Ukraine has influenced military activity, and draw conclusions surrounding feminization and colonial legitimation tactics in the context of Russia's aggressive actions within the past year. To accomplish this, an analysis of a selection of Vladimir Putin's public speeches will be examined within this framework.

## Feminist International Relations

The inclusion of gender discourse in power relations is a key facet of feminist IR theory, where the centrality and pervasiveness of gender within the maintenance of political and social hierarchies influences political actors, institutions, and states.<sup>1</sup> The unequal relationship between genders can be viewed as a matrix that legitimizes multiple systems of inequality. The exploitation of social structures is often demonstrated in political narratives and foreign policy propaganda, where an “Us” versus “Them” characterization delineates the boundaries between the superior masculine and the subordinate feminine.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the interrelationship between gender discourse and the production of social hierarchies, the weight these two factors have within political discourse is unsurprising. The purpose of legitimation is to rationalize and validate established institutions so that their existence is recognized by individuals as subjectively reasonable and customary.<sup>3</sup> Legitimation is a tiered method that accepts the cultural attraction to the “symbolic universe”—expansive qualities of a society such as religion and the state—with the ultimate goal of including all institutions under a symbolic totality.<sup>4</sup> Political leaders are thus able to employ numerous symbolic means to mold their rhetoric and behaviours to embody the cultural norms or frames that reflect the population’s cultural standards. In a patriarchal culture that celebrates hypermasculine traits for men and traditionally feminine roles for women, political leaders can weaponize gendered narratives, symbols, and conducts to strengthen and legitimize their political authority.

### *Masculinization versus Feminization*

Masculinity’s script and ritualized performances are inextricably bound to childhood development, societal expectations, and individual body politics.<sup>5</sup> While masculinity can take multiple forms, the following analysis solely refers to those that are based in insecure social connections and the ensuing distancing and attention difficulties.<sup>6</sup> Individual body politics are then reflected in states, political bodies, their intimate circles and supporters, as well as “othered” groups, who are the objects of guilt-inducing and humiliating actions.<sup>7</sup>

“Hegemonic masculinity” is a term used to describe the dominant form of masculinity, often characterized by the tendency to minimize interpersonal con-

nections and constructive communication.<sup>8</sup> Inherently, hegemonic masculinity not only works to subordinate traditionally “feminine” traits, but controls and regulates other “deviant” masculinities that do not conform to the normative ideal.<sup>9</sup> Through this lens, legitimation, both socially and politically, can thus be associated with an individual’s alignment to hypermasculine traits and their ability to uphold traditional gender norms. Acknowledging that all political actors are seeking legitimation to some extent, feminist IR theory problematizes gendered discourses and the reverence of hypermasculine narratives within political dialogues for its capacity to promote aggression and violent behaviours.

## **Vladimir Putin and the Muzhik**

In contemporary Russia, the concept of *muzhik* (muzhik) must be applied to any analysis of the intimate relationship between masculinity and political legitimation. While the direct translation of “muzhik” means “man” in English, its connotations are deeply representative of Russian gender norms and expectations. In the post-Soviet period, “muzhik” has undergone a cultural transformation from its traditional negative association with an ignorant male peasant to its current embodiment as the “norm of Russian masculinity,” represented in media as a descriptor of “real” manhood.<sup>10</sup> The attainment of the muzhik status requires the adoption of the aforementioned hypermasculine traits with a fusion of liberal and Soviet norms of masculinity:

This type [of masculinity] is founded on self-sufficiency, economic independence, [and] respect for private property ... A “muzhik” does not agree with the liberal values of political correctness; sexism and homophobia are not considered faults in the [post-Soviet] environment ... a “muzhik is hardy, strong, and powerful. Finally, he is a patriot—he prefers the values of his national culture, and expresses his readiness to defend the Motherland.<sup>11</sup>

Russia’s leadership not only exploits this manifestation of masculinity, but also engages in active efforts to perpetuate and promote it.<sup>12</sup> As the muzhik concept began to rise in popularity in Russia as a distinctive masculine ideal, Putin’s image was simultaneously curated to fit the cultural norm. Over the past two decades, there has been a deliberate effort to construct Putin’s public persona as that of a “tsar-father” who is capable of safeguarding Russia’s interests against perceived threats of Western institutional and ideological expansion.<sup>13</sup> Putin’s physical body and public discourse have simultaneously under-



gone a “muzhik” transformation. Often resorting to colourfully foul language and slang, his construction of a political macho masculinity stands in a sharp contrast to normative Western discourse.<sup>14</sup> Widespread images of the shirtless Russian president riding horseback or fishing in Siberia have also curated an indirect confirmation of Putin’s status as a “real muzhik” and a representation of the ideal model of national.<sup>15</sup>

The depiction of Putin as a real muzhik extends beyond seemingly laughable images of his arm-wrestling prowess and into a tool of power legitimization. Prior to the 2012 presidential elections, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobianin exclaimed at one of Putin’s rallies: “We have a candidate for president who does not chatter, who works really hard ... I know how he takes responsibility for everything; he is a real muzhik, a real leader, a man of his word and deeds....”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the nation’s citizens consider masculine cultural norms and qualities worthy of authority, they must now be recognized as a significant resource for power legitimization.<sup>17</sup>

## Ukraine and Russia’s Relationship Through a Postcolonial Lens

Alongside gender as a consideration in political discourse is the influence of colonial legacies in the creation of cultural narratives and legitimization tactics. Ukraine’s relationship with Soviet colonialism has been neglected within academic scholarship due to the supposed lacking applicability of the “post-colonial” brand to the former Soviet/Russian imperial sphere. According to Moore’s analysis, Ukraine, along with other former Soviet states, was allocated to a “dynastic” result of colonization,<sup>18</sup> where local leaders became integrated within the imperial mission and colonial affairs were ethnicized: “local language and culture became a stigma, a sign of backwardness, “blackness,” and inferiority vis-à-vis the superior Russophones who represented both wealth and power.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Ukraine’s current relationship with Russia operates within the shadow of the *Russkii Mir*.<sup>20</sup>

### *Gendered Considerations*

An additional layer of analysis within postcolonial theory considers the embeddedness of femininity within securitization discourses. The concept of

“othering,” whereby a dominant group (the Self/Us) marginalizes those who are deemed to be different or “other” based on aspects of identity, thus legitimizing their domination, is central to this particular narrative. While the Kremlin has sought to instrumentalize Russia’s status as an aggressive masculine force, a narrative of othering and feminizing Ukraine has operated in tandem. Through this lens, Russia justifies their control over Ukraine by imposing a condescendingly gendered narrative of the country as an effeminate, “sexually deviant mistress.”<sup>21</sup> While cultural Russian tropes of masculinity depicted in the country’s powerful leadership and sovereignty have now become synonymous with the nation’s branding techniques, the simultaneous symbolic demasculinization of Ukraine reifies the image of the Self (Russia) and the Other (Ukraine).

The consequences of remasculinization and demasculinization within public discourse and political rhetoric position Russia as a symbol of authority over Ukraine, justifying its power and laying the foundation for the acceptance of aggression.<sup>22</sup> This discourse is often seen among pro-Kremlin commentators who have espoused a heavily gendered rhetoric on social media channels, describing Ukraine as a loose woman in need of saving by its older brother or as a damsel in distress whose morals need realignment by its virtuous sister.<sup>23</sup> The Kremlin subordinates Ukraine by simultaneously feminizing and denying its right for political sovereignty. The construction of this dehumanising hierarchical relationship between the two countries thus legitimizes violence and rationalizes control.<sup>24</sup>

The following sections will explore how exactly postcolonial gendered tropes have permeated Putin’s narrative of the events in Ukraine, demonstrating the effectiveness of hierarchical feminization tactics in the legitimization of war.

## **Methodology**

Extensive research has considered Putin’s hypermasculine image, centering his macho appearance within discussions of body politics and masculinity in the domestic sphere. I was interested in exploring whether these gendered tropes have actual repercussions within Russia’s foreign policy approaches. More specifically, I wanted to apply Putin’s consistently masculinized narrative to his public discourse of Russia’s invasion on February 24, 2022. I framed

my research as a discourse analysis of a selection of Putin's public speeches made between February 8, 2022, and the time of writing—April 2023.

The excerpts of speeches chosen were manually selected from the official Russian Presidential Executive Office's website based on whether they contained gendered connotations regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Some of these speeches had been officially translated by the Office, while others were translated by the author using translation software. The following section will analyze how Putin has promoted the feminization of Ukraine through his public discourse, as well as demonstrate how these narratives have legitimized the invasion and justified the brutal crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Russian military against the Ukrainian population.

## Discourse Analysis

### *Speech #1*

«Нравится, не нравится – терпи, моя красавица»,<sup>25</sup> said Vladimir Putin to French President Emmanuel Macron during a press conference on February 8, 2022, just weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Translated to English, the joke reads: "You may like it, you may not, but you'll have to endure it, my beauty." This obscene rape joke referenced Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's rejection of the Minsk-2 agreement, in which Putin's response insisted that Ukraine must accept the terms whether it liked it or not.<sup>26</sup> Many have recognized that the phrase likely originates from the Russian punk band Krasnaya Plesen, which is known for its misogynistic, sadistic, profanity-filled, and necrophiliac lyrics. The refrain from the song in question goes: «Спит красавица в гробу, я подкрался и ебу / Нравится, не нравится, спи, моя красавица».<sup>27</sup> Translated to English, the meaning is equally vile: "A beauty is sleeping in the coffin, I've crept up and now I am fucking her / You may like it, you may not, sleep, my beauty."<sup>28</sup> In his official statement, Putin only altered one word: he exchanged the word *спи* (sleep) to *терпи* (endure). When comparing the two sentences, it is practically indisputable that the Russian president intended to carry over the original meaning of the song to his official statement. The phrase is a crude and macho use of language that is inappropriate for any setting, let alone an internationally broadcasted political press conference. Putin's intentional use of language deeply imbued with implied

gender dominance and gender violence is a disgusting metaphor for Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

In the official "Address by the President of the Russian Federation" on February 24, 2022, marking the commencement of the invasion, Putin stated: «При этом в наши планы не входит оккупация украинских территорий. Мы никому и ничего не собираемся навязывать силой»<sup>29</sup> which translates to "It is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force."<sup>30</sup> While repeatedly establishing Russia's disinterest in invading Ukraine, Putin made it extremely clear on February 8, 2022, that Russia still will force itself upon Ukraine if certain expectations are not met. The decline of Russia's former global dominance has forced the nation to fulfill its masculine narrative through aggressive means.

Putin's choice of language in both statements feminizes Ukraine by establishing it as a potential victim of Russia's rape, enforcing a distinct gendered power hierarchy between the two countries. More specifically, the aggressive masculine nature of the statements strengthens Putin's status of a "real muzhik": a hypermasculine patriot to whom sexism and strength comes naturally on the world stage.<sup>31</sup> The legitimization stemming from the gendered narrative Putin enforces within these statements supports the social and cultural model of the Russian muzhik, thus aligning Putin with Russians' patriarchal and nationalistic attitudes.<sup>32</sup> By reflecting the qualities that the public considers as both masculine and national through political discourse, Putin creates a scenario of power that effectively legitimizes violence.

## *Speech #2*

On February 21, 2022, a few days before the invasion began, Putin delivered another "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." On the question of Ukraine's historical legitimacy and sovereignty, Putin stated (translated into English on the Russian Presidential Executive Office's website):

Soviet Ukraine is the result of the Bolsheviks' policy and can be rightfully called 'Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine.' He was its creator and architect. This is fully and comprehensively corroborated by archival documents, including Lenin's harsh instructions regarding Donbass, which was actually shoved into Ukraine.<sup>33</sup>

This statement not only enforces Ukraine's hierarchical and territorial inferiority to Russia, but the way in which Putin curates this narrative has distinct

gendered undertones. Putin's use of language towards the end of the statement is especially notable, specifically the words « втиснули в состав Украины ». While the official English translation interprets this as “shoved into Ukraine”, the translation “forcibly inserted into Ukraine” is arguably more precise. Once again, this choice of language is another example of the heavily gendered and violent discourse that Putin uses regarding the relationship between the two countries.

### *Speech #3*

On May 9, 2022, Putin spoke at the annual Victory Parade on Red Square, a military parade marking the seventy-seventh anniversary of the Second World War. After referencing the national significance and memory politics of the Great Patriotic War, Putin shifted to his justification of the horrors occurring in Ukraine (unofficially translated to English):

Preparations were openly underway for another punitive operation in the Donbass, for an invasion of our historical lands, including Crimea. Kiev announced the possible acquisition of nuclear weapons. The NATO bloc has begun active military development of the territories adjacent to us. Thus, a threat that was absolutely unacceptable to us was systematically created, and directly at our borders ... The danger grew every day. Russia gave a preemptive rebuff to aggression. It was a forced, timely and only right decision. The decision of a sovereign, strong, independent country.<sup>34</sup>

In this statement, Putin rationalizes his use of aggression in Ukraine as the “only right decision,” accusing NATO of building up weapons and nuclear power, and (falsely) accusing Ukraine of threatening to invade Russia's “historical lands.” Thus, Putin's decision to invade was allegedly justified due to the legitimate threat Ukraine posed to Russia through its provocative military escalation and association with the West. Alone, these statements do not jump out as especially gendered or sexualized in nature. However, taking into consideration the patterns of gendered violence that Putin espouses within his political narrative, it is reasonable to draw gendered conclusions. For example, Kira Rudik—a member of the Ukrainian Parliament—argues that Putin's rationale for invading Ukraine can be compared to the narrative where victims of sexual assault are blamed for the violence perpetrated against them due to their provocative appearance and behaviour.

When Putin argues that Ukraine's military build-up was justification for invading the sovereign country, it carries the same connotations as victim-blam-

ing arguments surrounding sexual assault. Repeatedly, Putin's sexualized and gendered public discourse create a gendered hierarchy, whereby Russia's invasion is consistently legitimated through gendered excuses, such as Ukraine's provocative behaviour, their historical inferiority, and the attitude that Russia is justified in acts of violence with or without the consent of other parties.

## Discussion

Putin's gendered and sexualized patterns of discourse do not operate within a vacuum. The consistency of his gendered vulgarism and hierarchy-enforcing narratives directed towards Ukraine and its citizens creates an acceptance of violence amongst the Russian Army. The values of a country's leadership reflect directly onto the behaviour of its population, which has been demonstrated by the horrific actions of Russian soldiers in Ukraine. The crimes against humanity uncovered in liberated Ukrainian towns including Bucha, Irpin, and Hostomel have exposed how central gender-based violence is in Putin's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> The extreme scale and disturbing brutality of rape and sexual torture reported in Ukraine is not consistent across all wars, indicating that the use of sexual violence against the Ukrainian population is part of the goals and incentives of the aggressor.<sup>36</sup> Though not an officially sanctioned tool of war in Ukraine, rape is being employed by Russian forces as a tool of humiliation and power assertion, a similar trend to Putin's verbal narratives.

Though Putin's macho image and throwaway gendered language can appear trivial compared to tangible military action, I highlight how significant discourse can be in determining real foreign policy outcomes. The actions of Russian soldiers and the Ukrainian lives that they have cruelly abused is a direct reflection of Vladimir Putin's consistent enforcement of feminized power hierarchies and the legitimization of gendered aggression. Acknowledging the importance of the perpetuation of these narratives within foreign policy analysis cannot be understated and could lead to the detection of potentially malignant warning signs in future contexts.

## Conclusion

NATO expansion and Russia's geopolitical relationship with Western powers are certainly important frames of analysis when considering the causes of

this invasion. This chapter's intention is not to undermine the significance of these arguments, but rather to propose that the fundamental intentions of Putin's invasion of Ukraine may not be fully detectable from a structural perspective alone; we must consider the intimate and micro-level interactions occurring on the ground.<sup>37</sup> The intricate and nuanced interactions between Ukrainian citizens and Russian soldiers are often oversimplified with ideological explanations that are much too recognizable.

By employing feminist IR and postcolonial theoretical lenses, I have argued and demonstrated through an in-depth discourse analysis how gendered narratives within Putin's public discourse have legitimized the Kremlin's imperial ambitions and violence against Ukraine. This legitimation strategy has clear consequences, where gendered aggression on behalf of the Russian Army has become an accepted weapon of war. The horrific details of sexual abuse and torture are illustrations of an extremely dark conflict. While scholarly analysis and critique can feel trivial when compared to the real suffering that is occurring halfway across the world, drawing attention to the power of words and narratives is an unquestionably important task that must be acknowledged and pursued.

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