



Geopolitical Drivers of Russia's Military Intervention in Ukraine

Ahmad Rashidi 

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Arak University, Arak, Iran. Email: a-rashidi@araku.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the necessity of re-evaluating the drivers behind Russia's 2022 military intervention in Ukraine in the context of a realistic approach. The central research question investigates the primary drivers of Russia's intervention, with a research hypothesis emphasizing the role of geopolitical factors. Drawing on John J. Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism theory, this study contends that the security dilemma within the international system places significant emphasis on geopolitical security concerns, which in turn shape Russia's military intervention policy. Through a qualitative research methodology, the findings reveal that the geopolitical drivers of Russia's intervention in Ukraine encompass several key facets: safeguarding national security, promoting imperialist nationalism and supporting the Russian diaspora, consolidating Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet Eurasia region, and seeking recognition of Russia's great power status within the international system. The significance of this research lies in its elucidation of the hierarchical positioning of these geopolitical drivers within Russia's security priorities. Furthermore, the study recognizes the overarching influence of Russia's great power status, which serves as a geopolitical umbrella that binds together the other components. Within the context of this study, geopolitical drivers refer to the key factors related to geopolitical security concerns that motivate Russia's military intervention in Ukraine.

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Introduction

During the new history of international relations many cases of military interventions have been happened in the world. The frequency of military conflicts between governments led some scholars to consider the history of international relations as the history of wars and military conflicts. In the contemporary world, military interventions by great powers have become a routine act; in such a way that military interventions are considered as signs of great power status. The Russian Federation, as one of the great power claimants, has also followed this manner and during the last 30 years recorded 29 cases of military intervention (Rashidi, 2022: 13-14).

Previous research on Russia's military interventions has predominantly focused on and garnered significant media attention for cases such as Georgia, Chechnya, Syria, and Ukraine. These selected cases are not exhaustive of all Russia's military interventions, but rather encompass the most significant or contentious ones. It is important to note that Russia's military interventions span a broad spectrum. They can be categorized into four distinct groups: first, direct interventions involving active engagement in the battlefield; second, interventions in the context of United Nations peacekeeping missions; third, interventions as independent peacekeeping efforts outside the framework of the United Nations; and fourth, interventions characterized by the establishment of military bases in host countries. However, the current body of research predominantly highlights and analyzes the aforementioned prominent interventions, leaving many other cases with less scholarly attention.

Looking at the list of Russia's interventions, it becomes apparent that all of interventions happened in the post-Soviet Eurasia, except the case of Syria and the cases of participation in UN peacekeeping missions. In addition, the early interventions in the 1990s and 2000s happened at a limited level and mainly within the framework of UN peacekeeping missions, but the later interventions happened mainly in the form of direct military conflict and out of the UN regulations. In other words, Russia's interventions over the time have become more offensive and widespread (Rashidi, 2022: 13).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is sometimes seen as an evolution in the pattern of Russia's military interventions. Therefore, recognizing the various dimensions of Russia's invention of Ukraine as an unfinished event requires doing new research. The present article was prepared to address this research requirement. For this purpose, research question focuses on the main geopolitical drivers of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. The hypothesis that has been examined in response to the research question is that the geopolitical drivers have central role in Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. The geopolitical components that have been identified and analyzed in this article as drivers of military intervention in Ukraine include the following four items: maintaining national security, advancing the policy of imperialist nationalism and supporting the Russian diaspora, establishing Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet Eurasia region, and finally, but not the least, advancing the recognition of Russia's great power status in the international system. Indeed, the mentioned drivers are closely related to each other, and among them, the great power status make the structure of interactions among other geopolitical drivers of intervention in Ukraine. By referring to Mersheimer's Offensive Realism theory, this article argues that the security dilemma in the international system places geopolitical security concerns at the center of Russia's motivation toward military intervention policy. Understanding the influence of the security dilemma on Russia's military intervention policy is crucial for comprehending the complex dynamics of international relations and predicting potential geopolitical conflicts.

According to the research question, hypothesis and variables, the method of research in this study is qualitative method that is applied with a descriptive and analytical approach. The

required data and information have been collected by referring to library resources and databases available in the global Internet network and then analyzed qualitatively. The article structure includes the following items: research background; Theoretical Approach; Conceptual Framework; Process of Ukraine Crisis; geopolitical drivers of military intervention in Ukraine include great power status, regional hegemony, imperialist nationalism and maintaining national security; And finally, the conclusion.

1. Research Background

Various studies have been published on Russia's 2022 military interventions in Ukraine. Most scholars argue that nationalist sentiments and motivations, coupled with the Russian leaders' perception of Ukraine as an integral part of their historical identity, drive their belief that Ukraine should reunite with the motherland (Mankoff, 2022). This emphasizes the complex interplay between nationalism and geopolitical decision-making, shedding light on Russia's intentions towards Ukraine. In explaining Russia's motivations for invasion of Ukraine, several other scholars emphasize on economical drivers. These scholars argue that much of the reasons for the potential annexation of Ukraine concerns natural resources, particularly oil and gas, which supply a large percentage of consumers in the European Union. This means it is strategically advantageous for Russia, being a non-European Union member, to have control of Ukraine for economic reasons (Johannesson & Clowes, 2022; Welfens, 2023). In accordance with this approach, H. Hanappi (2022) presents an interpretation of the underlying dynamics of global political economy, which has led to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. He introduces his paper as an alternative to interpretations that view the individual psychological traits of Vladimir Putin as the driving force behind this event.

On the other hand, there is a wide consensus among scholars that the main driver of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine has geopolitical roots. Academics such as I. Kotoulas and W. Pusztai (2022) explain Russia's interests in the annexation of Ukraine, primarily for geopolitical factors. Similarly in his study P. Dipp (2022) analyzed Russia's justification of the invasion based on the fact that Russia feels that its security is being threatened by the continued expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe (what Moscow considers as a red line that cannot be accepted or tolerated). According to J. Karami and S. Fazeli (2018), Russia's interventions in Syria and Ukraine can be attributed to its desire to safeguard its maritime lines and geopolitical interests. They highlight the presence of Russian naval bases in both countries, emphasizing the importance of maintaining and strengthening control over the Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea. E. Koolae and M. Sedaghat (2017) link Russia's offensive foreign policy to the expansion of geopolitical rivalries with the Western bloc, particularly citing the perceived threats posed by Ukraine's alignment with Western political, economic, security, and military frameworks. James Koyle (2018) also underscores the impact of geopolitical factors on Russia's military interventions. On the other hand, Gerard Toal (2017) and Roy Allison (2013) focus on the justifications provided by Russia for its interventions, rather than exploring the root causes and motivations. Samuel Charap et al (2021), in their comparative study of military interventions by China, Russia, and Iran, attribute the main driver of Russia's interventions to geopolitical considerations. D. Davis and M. Slobodchkoff (2022) meanwhile discuss the influence of great power competition on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Their analysis delves into the broader context of global power dynamics. In contrast to the aforementioned works, this paper makes a distinctive contribution by specifically focusing on the geopolitical drivers of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and analyzing their position within Russia's hierarchy of security priorities. Furthermore, it recognizes Russia's great power status as an overarching geopolitical framework that binds together other components. Remarkably, none of the above-mentioned

resources have explicitly addressed the significance of great power status in understanding Russia's geopolitical actions. Therefore, the conceptual framework of this article can be considered innovative in its approach to delineating the relative importance of each driver within Russia's geopolitical security agenda. By shining a spotlight on this aspect, the paper enriches the scholarly discourse on Russia's military interventions and offers a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

2. Theoretical Approach

The role of "realism" in explaining Russia's decision to invade Ukraine has been a highly contested subject, both within the field of International Relations and in broader public intellectual discourse, especially since the onset of the war in February 2022. Central to this debate is the perspective of John J. Mearsheimer, a prominent offensive realist and Professor of International Relations at the University of Chicago (Smith and Dawson, 2022: 1). This article contends that while Mearsheimer's offensive realism is a notable perspective, it is just one among various realist theories that can offer explanations for the Ukraine War.

Given the research hypothesis that assigns a significant role to geopolitical factors as the main drivers of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, the neo-realism approach, specifically Mearsheimer's offensive realism theory, holds considerable theoretical capacity to support this argument. According to Mearsheimer, the anarchic nature of the international system compels governments to seek greater power to ensure their security. In pursuit of this goal, governments prioritize self-reliance over international cooperation, creating a context that fosters military conflicts among states. Mearsheimer further suggests that when analyzing the behavior of great powers, it becomes apparent that they are willing to risk war in their pursuit of power to maximize security and survival. From his perspective, notions like democratic peace and security cooperation serve as mere cover-ups for the offensive actions undertaken by great powers. Ultimately, their primary objective is to secure their survival by maximizing influence and preventing others from seizing opportunities for influence (Mottaghi et al., 2010: 7-11; Smith and Dawson, 2022: 2-5).

Applying the above theoretical approach to explain Russia's behavior, it can be argued that as a claimant to great power status, Russia is deeply concerned and feels threatened by NATO's expansion into post-Soviet regions. Consequently, to address its insecurities, Russia seeks to maximize its power and establish a hegemonic position in post-Soviet Eurasia, thus ensuring its desired great power status. In this context, Russia's military intervention in Ukraine can be interpreted as an endeavor to achieve its security objectives. Given the central role assigned to seeking great power status and maintaining regional hegemony as geopolitical components in the research hypothesis, offensive realism emerges as a fitting theoretical foundation for this study.

3. Conceptual Framework

In the figure below, the conceptual framework of the geopolitical drivers of Russia's military interventions is drawn based on the neorealism approach. In this model, responding to geopolitical security concerns is at the core of Russia's military interventions.

According to Mearsheimer's theory, Russia endeavors to address these concerns by asserting its great power status within the international system, which necessitates assuming the role of a hegemonic power in post-Soviet Eurasia. In this pursuit, ensuring Russia's national security becomes the paramount objective, which is pursued through the establishment of great power status, the consolidation of regional hegemony, and the promotion of imperialist nationalism.

By leveraging its military capabilities and exerting influence over neighboring states,

Russia seeks to safeguard its perceived national security interests. It views the enlargement of NATO as a direct threat, as it perceives the alliance's expansion into post-Soviet regions as encroachment into its traditional sphere of influence. To counteract this perceived security dilemma, Russia aims to maximize its power and enhance its regional dominance. By adopting Mearsheimer's offensive realism lens, this perspective highlights Russia's motivations and actions as driven by a combination of security concerns, pursuit of great power status, consolidation of regional hegemony, and imperialist nationalism. It underscores the complex dynamics that shape Russia's approach to the Ukraine conflict and the broader international system.

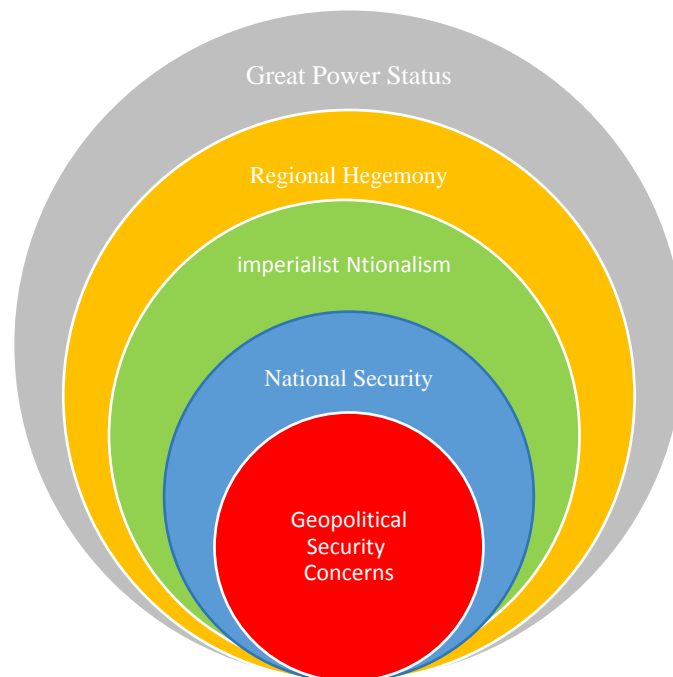


Figure 1. The Hierarchy of geopolitical drivers of Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014 and 2022
(Source: Author)

4. The Process of Ukraine Crisis

The military conflict between Russia and Ukraine can in fact date back to February 2014. Hostilities were initiated by Russia shortly after Ukraine's Maidan (Dignity) Revolution and were focused on the political status of Crimea and the Donbas, which remain internationally recognized as part of Ukraine. Invasions into Ukraine culminated in annexation of Crimea, followed shortly afterwards by the beginning of the war in Donbas between Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian state forces. during the first eight years, the conflict included naval incidents, cyber warfare, and heightened political tensions. Throughout 2021, bilateral tensions rose due to a Russian military buildup surrounding Ukrainian territory, and on 24 February 2022, the conflict saw a major escalation as Russia invaded mainland Ukraine.

On 22 February 2014, Ukrainian then President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted from office as a result of the Maidan Revolution, which broke out after his decision to reject the European Union–Ukraine Association Agreement and instead pursue closer ties with Russia. Shortly after Yanukovich's overthrow and exile to Russia, Ukraine's eastern and southern regions erupted with pro-Russia unrest. Simultaneously, unmarked Russian troops moved into Ukraine's Crimea and took control of strategic positions and infrastructure. On 16 March 2014, Russia organized the internationally unrecognized Crimean status referendum, the outcome of which was in favor of Crimea coming under Russian sovereignty; Russia annexed Crimea two days after the referendum was held. In April 2014, Russian separatists in eastern

Ukraine proclaimed the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic with support from Russia (Ray, 2024 a).

In August 2014, a large convoy of unmarked Russian military vehicles crossed the border and entered the Donetsk Oblast. Although Russia attempted to hide its involvement, Russian troops directly participated in decisive battles in Donbas and also maintained strategic reserves that would be ready to move into Ukraine when necessary. In February 2015, the Minsk-2 Agreement was signed by Russia and Ukraine to end the conflict, but a number of disputes prevented cooperative measures from being fully implemented. The war in Donbas eventually settled into a static conflict between Ukraine and the two Russia-backed puppet states. By 2019, 7 percent of Ukraine had been designated by the Ukrainian government as being "temporarily occupied" by Russia.

In late 2021 and early 2022, Russia built up a massive military presence surrounding Ukraine. The NATO accused Russia of readying for an invasion of the Ukrainian mainland, which the Russian government denied. As tensions rose over the buildup, Russian president Vladimir Putin criticized the enlargement of NATO and demanded that Ukraine be barred from ever joining the military organization. He also expressed Russian irredentist views and questioned Ukraine's right to exist, stating that the Ukrainian state was established by Vladimir Lenin under the Soviet Union. On 21 February 2022, Russia officially recognized the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, and openly sent Russian troops into Ukraine's separatist-controlled territories. After three days, Putin announced the beginning of a "special military operation" in Ukraine, signaling the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of the Ukrainian mainland. In this way, Russian military forces moved into eastern and southern Ukraine, and also into northern Ukraine from Belarus (Ray, 2024 b). Now An open-ended event ongoing in the international politics, which in political terminology is known as Russia's Invasion of Ukraine. The following sections of the article is dedicated to discuss the origins of this event.

5. Great Power Status

Some of researchers who have studied the meaning of Russia's great power status have adopted a constructivist approach and then interpreted the status as an identity position (Nouri, 2010; Barzegar et al., 2020). But in this article, while respecting the approach of this group of researchers, Russia's great power status is considered as a geopolitical entity in line with Mearsheimer's neo-realism theory through which Russia responds to perceived threats especially from NATO. In this article, the central driver of Russia's foreign policy is widely recognized as its pursuit of great power status. Moscow firmly believes that it holds a significant position in the world and expects this status to be acknowledged by other major powers, particularly the United States (Emamifar, et al., 2023; Zomorodi & Haj Yousefi, 2021: 118; Cuppuleri, 2021). This emphasis on great power recognition shapes Russia's foreign policy decisions and actions. One of the main goals of Russia's foreign policy has been to advance the recognition of this status in the international system; something that is reflected in the context and concept of Russia's supreme rules on foreign policy and national security strategy. The concept of Russia's foreign policy (2016), is emphasized on ensuring Russia's role as a "great power in the global balance". the Russia's national security strategy, in the latest amendment (2021), also emphasized on the consolidation of Russia's status as a great power through expressions such as Russia as "one of the influential centers in the multipolar world" and "a leading global power" (Koolae et al., 2022: 314). According to Russia's president Vladimir Putin: "Our entire historical experience tells us that a country like Russia can only survive ...if it is a great power." (Charap, et al, 2021: 30).

In accordance with the foreign policy and national security strategy, Russia claimant has always tried to intervene militarily in other countries (Karami and Fazeli, 2018: 197). The history of Russia's pursuit of great power status and the assertion of its influence dates back to as early as 1993. At that time, President Boris Yeltsin called for international organizations to recognize Russia as a guarantor of peace and stability in the post-Soviet Eurasian countries. In 1995, Yeltsin issued a decree outlining Russia's policy towards its neighbors, which allowed for cooperation with international organizations to address regional conflicts. However, the decree also emphasized that the region was primarily Russia's zone of influence, highlighting the country's assertive stance (Charap et al., 2021: 31). As the statements demonstrate, this element of Russian status concerns long predates Putin's rise to power. In this regard, Ted Hopf (2005) has pointed out that the emphasis on Russia's great power responsibilities explains Russia's peacekeeping operation in the Abkhazia region that began in 1994. In the process of intervening in the civil war between Georgians and Abkhazians, Russia sought to take the leadership of peacekeeping operation in this region. The operation was formally conducted under the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States of former USSR) that providing symbolic degree of multilateral endorsement of the peacekeeper, while all the peacekeeper soldiers were Russian. Russia even sought to obtain UN endorsement of the CIS peacekeeping operation, and eventually received acknowledgment. (UNSC, 1994). The peacekeeping operation gave Russia the position of regional arbiter, consistent with its vision for great power behavior.

Russia's great power status also was the central driver of military intervention beyond the post-Soviet Eurasia. Russia's intervention in Balkan crisis in the 1990s- through participating peacekeeping missions- was certainly inspired by Russia's great power status and driven by Moscow's sense that it should be part of any international efforts to address any major crises. During that period, Moscow could achieve status largely by being included as an equal (or almost equal) with Washington in peacekeeping operations. Also, there is broad consensus among analysts that the intervention in Syria is strongly influenced by Russia's great-power status and its geopolitical circumstances at the time: Western oriented sanctions and attempted diplomatic isolation following Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and intervention in eastern Ukraine. Additionally, the intervention in Syria provided a platform for potential great power cooperation on the shared threat of terrorism (Adamsky, 2015). In any case, "both the expected status benefits accrued from intervening and the expected status costs from not doing so factored into Russian decision-making on Syria. In the event, the intervention reinforced Russia's agenda-setting clout both in the region and globally" (Charap, et al, 2021: 32). Therefore, considering the mentioned historical background and the continuation of the principles of Russia's foreign policy over the time, it can be argued that the Russia's intervention policies in Ukraine are also influenced by its great power status.

According to Henry Kissinger, Putin views Russia as a mystical entity that has maintained its unity across its vast territory through spiritual efforts. In this vision, Ukraine holds a special significance. Kissinger suggests that Putin believes Russia cannot be a great power without dominance over Ukraine (Kissinger, 2022). Robert Hunter, a former US Ambassador to NATO, highlights that Russia strongly opposes the idea of Ukraine joining NATO. Given Ukraine's strategic location and its history as part of the Soviet Union, Hunter argues that Ukraine cannot be treated as just another Central European country when it comes to NATO membership (Hunter, 2022). In the context of the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO, some argue that Putin's invasion of Ukraine is driven by his aim to restore Russia's reputation as a great power and to put an end to what is perceived as a post-Cold War era of humiliation (Dibb, 2022: 10).

6. Regional Hegemony

According to offensive realism, a theory in international relations, great powers tend to seek regional hegemony, especially in their immediate vicinity. This means that establishing dominance in the region is seen as crucial for being considered a great power. In order to protect their influence and address potential threats, great powers may resort to military interventions to shape or stabilize states and their policies. Russia, in particular, perceives the post-Soviet Eurasian region as its exclusive zone of influence. Consequently, it views any exertion of influence by other powers in this region, particularly the expansion of NATO, as a significant threat to its interests, which it cannot tolerate (Sanaei and Atari Sangari, 2011: 30).

This issue is reflected in the Russian National Security Strategy 2021, at Articles 34 and 35 (Koolae et al., 2022: 214). Maintaining hegemony in post-Soviet Eurasia is closely related to Russia's aspirations to be a great power. Since the early 1990s, Russia has mainly focused on controlling Western-leaning states in the region. At the beginning of the 21st century, Russia's influence in the region was increasingly challenged by the European Union and NATO. Therefore, the revival and preservation of regional hegemony became more central in Moscow's interventions. Following NATO's 2004 enlargement, the organization bordered several post-Soviet Eurasian states. NATO's Bucharest Summit Declaration in April 2008 stated that Georgia and Ukraine "will become" members of the alliance in the future. NATO began to develop far more comprehensive partnerships with both Tbilisi and Kyiv than it had in the 1990s. As of 2009, the EU also began pursuing closer ties with a broader array of regional states through its Eastern Partnership (Charap and Colton: 2017: 95-101; Sazmand, 2018:149-152). In September 2020, Ukraine adopted its new national security strategy that emphasized more cooperation until membership in NATO. One year later, it announced the strategy of returning Crimea to the Ukraine.

Many scholars have argued that military intervention in Ukraine aimed to maintain Russia's regional influence. They considered the possibility of Ukraine's membership in NATO as an important driver of Russia's military intervention (Emamifar et al, 2023; Dipp, 2022; Kotoulas and Pusztai, 2022). Mearsheimer similarly has written that Moscow's position on the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass is based on the geopolitical logic of zero and one, according to which "great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory" (Mearsheimer: 2014: 84). Therefore, in his opinion, Russia seeks to maintain regional hegemony and prevent the enlargement of NATO to Russia's borders (Chotiner, 2022).

Elias Götz (2015) suggests that Russia's interventions in Ukraine can be understood as a response to geopolitical considerations. No major power would desire to have countries in their immediate vicinity aligned with foreign military alliances or geopolitical blocs, and Russia is no exception. Russia has a genuine national interest in preventing external powers from establishing a presence in post-Soviet Eurasia (Götz, 2015: 5). Dov Lynch (2000) meanwhile attempts to provide theoretical insights into Russia's behavior in the region. He emphasizes that at the core of Russian policy towards its neighboring states, there is a desire to cultivate friendly regimes that are accommodating to Russian interests. Lynch characterizes Russia's peacekeeping interventions as a strategy of armed persuasion, aiming to safeguard Russian interests and stabilize conflict zones (Lynch, 2000: 173-179).

In general, the post-Soviet Eurasian states increasingly tend to disobey Moscow. In such an environment, Russian leaders have used military interventions as a tool to influence and make them accountable. In such an atmosphere, Russian leaders have used military interventions to make post-Soviet Eurasian states as accountable states to Moscow. They consider the USA's support of the uprising in Ukraine as a tool for weakening Russia's regional hegemony; therefore strongly feel threatened by democratic movements or successful democratic

governments in neighboring countries (Koesel and Bunce, 2013). Many scholars have emphasized on this issue in explaining the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine. According to Olga Oliker et al., during the Maidan (Dignity) Revolution “Putin took action not simply to counter what he saw as Western activity on Russia’s border and to maintain influence in Ukraine. Rather, Russia has annexed Crimea and helped maintain a conflict in eastern Ukraine to prevent this overthrow of the existing order from leading to a successful, functioning government—or even a semi-successful, but still functioning, one” (Oliker et al, 2015: 144). In dealing with the colour revolutions, Russian leaders emphasize on its geopolitical threats, which can be associated with the process of democratization.

According to these scholars, colour revolutions in post-Soviet Eurasia, particularly in Ukraine, are aimed at diminishing Russia's regional influence. As a result, they argue that Russia perceives stopping these revolutions as a geopolitical necessity rather than a normative objective. From the perspective of offensive realism, this context encourages Russia, as a claimant of great power status, to counter threats through military intervention. Furthermore, Oliker et al suggest that Putin's policy in the war for Ukraine and military campaign planning are driven by clear Russian strategic interests. It is crucial for Russia to maintain control or influence over the territories of the former Soviet Union, which involves fostering economic cooperation with these states. Putin is unwilling to tolerate Ukraine's movement away from the former Soviet/Russian sphere of influence. Additionally, Russian strategic interests include securing geostrategic advantages such as full control of the Sea of Azov and the northern Black Sea coast, as well as establishing a buffer zone between Russia and NATO. Putin perceives this buffer zone as being threatened or even non-existent due to the ongoing process of rapprochement between Ukraine and NATO/EU (Kotoulas and Pusztai, 2022: 28).

7. Imperialist Nationalism

There indeed exists a significant body of literature that emphasizes the role of Russian nationalism in explaining Russia's military interventions, particularly in Ukraine. Many scholars argue that the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine are driven, at least in part, by a revival of Russian nationalism under President Putin's leadership. Russian nationalism is seen as a potent force that shapes Russia's foreign policy decisions, particularly in its neighboring regions. In addition Russia’s pursuit of great-power status and its assertion of hegemony in post-Soviet Eurasia can be portrayed as national wills resulting from either neo- or post-imperialist urges (Grigas, 2016). Alexander Dugin is one of the most famous Russian philosophers who have theorized such an imperialistic nationalism. In fact, his thoughts have inspired the neo-Eurasians discourse as well as Putin's foreign policy doctrine (Rashidi, 2017: 318). Similarly, Andrew Wilson in a 2014 study believes that “Russia’s addiction to dangerous myths,” among them “that the former USSR was the *lost territory* of historical Russia,” can explain the interventions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (Wilson, 2014: vii).

Nationalism played a significant role in the decision to annex Crimea, as evidenced by the strong attachment many Russians have to the region. The intervention in Ukraine can be explained, in part, by the nationalistic aspects of Pan-Slavism. Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are considered the main centers of Slavic peoples, with Kiev regarded as the historical origin for Russians. It was in Kiev that the Russian government, as a historical identity, was first formed. Additionally, Kiev introduced Orthodox Christianity as a national religion to Russians. Slavophiles believe that Kiev and Moscow are the main sources of Slavic culture and Orthodox Christianity. Historically, Ukraine was a part of Russia for several centuries. In the lead-up to the military intervention, Russian leaders' policy and statements clearly reflected these nationalist sentiments. For instance, in July 2021, Putin issued an article emphasizing the

historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians, describing them as one people. Putin claimed that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are descendants of ancient Rus, once the largest state in Europe. He highlighted the shared language, economic ties, and rule of the Scandinavian Rurik dynasty, and Orthodox faith that bound them together. The historical choice made by St Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, is said to largely determine their affinity today. However, Putin's interpretation of Russia's joint history with Ukraine fails to acknowledge the rise of Ukrainian nationalism, language, literature in the 19th century, and the brutal 1930s famine imposed on Ukraine during Soviet forced collectivization. He asserts that modern Ukraine is solely a product of the Soviet era. In various instances, Putin has vehemently expressed Russia's commitment to protecting its historical territories and the people living there from being used against the country.

These biased views regarding Ukraine as an integral part of Russia and the denial of its separate identity are not unique to Putin. Figures like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, before his death in 2008, advocated for the creation of a unified Slavic state consisting of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Solzhenitsyn also accused NATO of systematically deploying military forces in Eastern Europe and Russia's southern flank. Putin has utilized these accusations to concoct a justification for the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 under the pretext of "de-Nazification" and "demilitarization" of the Zelenskyy regime.

On the other hand, one of the most controversial issues in Russia's foreign policy is solidarity with Russian co-identity groups who living beyond the state's post-1991 borders. Russian calls these groups as "compatriots; a concept that includes all Russian speakers as well as those whose ties with Russia are wider than their respective countries. Moscow has partly justified its recent interventions—the Crimea annexation and the invasion of eastern Ukraine—on the grounds of protecting co-identity groups. After the events of 2014, some even spoke of a "Putin Doctrine": "a blanket assertion that Moscow has the right and the obligation to protect Russians anywhere in the world." (Charap, et al, 2021: 43). The supreme rules, also, emphasized to support compatriots. For example, in the latest Russian National Security Strategy (2021), articles 40 and 101 emphasize on the protection of "compatriots" and "citizens" outside the Russian borders (Koolae et al., 2022).

Russian leaders have mainly sought to create an image that they are serious about supporting their compatriots, even through military intervention. During the invasion of Ukraine, They repeatedly declare that Russia is unequivocally protecting Russians who live in Ukraine from genocide by "neo-Nazis and drug addicts" (Satzewich, 2022). However, on closer inspection, this factor appears to be more of an ex post facto justification for Russia's interventions rather than a main driver of them. As Lincoln Pigman writes, Moscow has "subordinated the needs of its compatriots to the broader national interest and adopted a policy of using its compatriots to achieve its wider foreign policy objectives. To use force in the name of its compatriots, Moscow must see an opportunity to achieve broader foreign policy objectives, not the possibility of alleviating its compatriot's difficulties" (Pigman, 2019: 25, 35).

8. National Security

National Security is somewhat difficult to differentiate from regional hegemony concerns, since Moscow considers NATO's increased influence in the neighborhood as a threat to regime security and even territorial integrity (Putin, 2022; Emamifar, et al., 2023; Haghshenas and Bavir, 2011: 14) Such threats could include all activities that could entail security consequences for Russia's territory.

Generally, Moscow sees external threats from instability along its border periphery. According to Andrew Radin, "Russia seeks stability externally, most of all on its borders,

because of a perceived direct link between events there and stability inside Russia.”(Radin, 2019: Charap, et al., 2021: 36). Russia’s definition of stability is in fact far more all-encompassing than traditional Western definitions, but it is important to note that the Russia’s leaders are concerned about political, economic, and social turmoil—particularly armed conflict—spilling over from neighboring countries into Russia. Therefore, any conflict or potential conflict, domestic unrest, or extremist elements on its periphery are seen as potential threats to Russian sovereignty that demand a response, including a military one. The threat of regional instability was certainly a key driver of Moscow’s interventions in the wars that broke out in several former Soviet republics as the USSR collapsed (Charap, et al., 2021: 37). Moscow's behavior can be attributed to two primary perceived threats to regime security. Firstly, Russian leaders strongly believe that the United States pursues a global policy of regime change, aiming to depose governments that do not align with its interests and install compliant leaders. Alongside military interventions, popular uprisings are also seen as tools used by the United States to achieve this objective. This perception has led to an increased suspicion of any popular movements or uprisings within Russia (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 2014).

The second threat to regime security is the transnational diffusion of democratic norms. Following Russia's shift towards autocracy in the 2000s, its leaders have grown fearful of the potential consequences posed by successful democratic movements or governments in neighboring countries. Scholars argue that Russian decision-makers see the achievements of democracy in nearby states as a potential inspiration for Russian citizens to rise up against the ruling elite and challenge the entire political system. Consequently, the transnational spread of democratic norms is viewed as a threat to the ruling elites' grip on power (Koesel and Bunce, 2013).

In terms of explaining Russia’s military interventions, this factor is most often cited in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in eastern Ukraine. According to Olga Oliker et al, if the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine succeeded, such a government might inspire the Russian people to overthrow Putin’s regime (Oliker et al., 2015). In this regard it should be note, In fact, Kremlin fears geopolitical diffusion rather than democratic diffusion. Because many Russian elites view popular revolutions in post-Soviet Eurasia, particularly in Ukraine, as a tool of U.S. foreign policy to undermine Russia’s regional influence, stopping those revolutions is more of a geopolitical imperative than a normative one. Putin’s views a Westernized democrat Ukraine that closely associated with European Union and NATO would be a national security threat to Russia; or, as Sergei Karaganov puts it, ‘a spearhead aimed at the heart of Russia’(Dibb, 2022: 9).

Conclusion

In this article, an attempt was made to explain geopolitical factors as the main drivers of military intervention in Ukraine. By referring to Mersheimer's Offensive Realism theory, this article argues that the security dilemma in the international system places geopolitical security concerns at the center of Russia's motivation toward military intervention policy. The geopolitical elements that identified and analyzed in this article as drivers of military intervention in Ukraine are include: maintaining national security, advancing the policy of imperialist nationalism, establishing Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet Eurasia region, and advancing the recognition of Russia's great power status in the international system. As mentioned in the different part of article, especially by looking to conceptual framework, it is understandable that the geopolitical drivers are closely related to each other. By the way, the great power status, make the structure of interactions among other geopolitical drivers of intervention in Ukraine. Basically, military intervention, especially in the near abroad,

constitutes the dominant behavior of great powers. According to the Offensive Realism, in the process of military interventions, great powers respond to the "threats" perceived from rival powers. Therefore, they have to continue to accumulate power. The research findings clearly show the application of this pattern in Russia's military interventions. Basically, the sought for great power status is the spirit of Russia's foreign policy and national security strategy. In practice, adherence to this policy can be clearly seen in Russia's attempt to consolidate hegemony and pursue imperialist nationalism through military intervention in the post-Soviet Eurasia region

In most cases, in the context of Russia's intervention in near abroad, it is difficult to separate the role of great power status from regional hegemony and imperialistic nationalism. In the Russian approach, these items are necessarily correlated variables and have same meaning in a line, as Mearsheimer acknowledged. However, among the two, the considerations related to the Russia's great power status are ontologically prior to the considerations of regional hegemony and imperialistic nationalism. In other words, regional hegemony and imperialism nationalism are inevitable requirements of Russia's great power status. Because, as Mearsheimer noted, no great power can stand the influence of foreign rivals in neighborhood or in its zone of influence. Therefore, it is possible to consider the great power status as the general framework of Russia's behavior in military interventions. This thesis is consistent with the context and concept of Russia's foreign policies and national security strategies in different periods. The ultimate goal of this approach, as outlined in the conceptual framework of the research, is to secure Russia's national security and maintaining its territorial integrity. As a final discussion, it is necessary to say that previous researches have mainly used the pragmatism approach to theoretical explanation of Russia's foreign policy. On this basis, seeking great power status and subsequently regional hegemony should be based on cost-benefit logic in Russia's foreign behavior. But it seems that Russia's inability to advance its goals during the recent intervention in Ukraine, challenges the logic of such analyzes and therefore it is necessary to search for a new conceptual format in order to complete the previous analyses. For this purpose, in future researches by focusing on the inadequacy of Russia's capabilities to advance the war in Ukraine, it is possible to talk about the emergence of quasi-ideological considerations in Russia's foreign policy during the recent invasion of Ukraine. In this regard, acquisitioning the great power status, regional hegemony and imperialist nationalism could be considered as quasi-ideological principles of Russia's foreign policy. Therefore, in order to explain this evolution in the future researches, methodically, a researcher can use a hybrid approach through combining offensive realism with an interpretative constructivist approach.

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