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THE POLITICAL DANGER OF NEO-REALISM - A CONSEQUENCE OF SELF-CONTRADICTIONARY LOGIC

SHALVA DZEBISASHVILI

106

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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This article represents an attempt to collect neo-realist intellectual property and put it in a systematic review by using the “Russian case;” that is, its foreign policy towards Georgia and Ukraine since 2008. It summarizes both theoretical and conceptual tenets of the neo-realist mainstream that are applied to modern world politics and despite multiple logical inconsistencies revealed, offer neo-realist interpretations (hypothetical suggestions; that is, behavioral expectations) as plausible explanations for this particular case - Russia’s behavior. In the end, the Russian case will be put under an intensive analytical scrutiny to test the validity of neo-realist claims.

Introduction

In the contemporary world of international relations, no argument has caused more response, counter reasoning and emotional defiance than that of American neo-realist scholars who attributed the Russian aggression in its neighborhood and its geopolitical push back to the West’s “resolute advance to the East” and, even more, justified Russian revisionist actions by the structural nature of the international system (detailed review in the next section). Renowned media outlets and publications, be it *Foreign Affairs*, *New York Times*, *Foreign Policy* or *The National Interest*, made multiple contributions public that run in line with the core rationale of the neo-realist claim and found broad international recognition, not to mention their impact on political decision-making and academic debate in the West and Europe, in particular.

Naturally, the neo-realists’ claim met with a sweeping wave of criticism, both in terms of their empirical (politics related) as well as theoretical consistency (more nuanced analysis in sections to follow). Although both dimensions of criticism bear exceptional potential for powerful arguments that negate neo-realist logic, a clear dominance of the empirical arm of counter argumentation is more than evident. There are several reasons for such asymmetry, largely to be found in the dynamic and fluent nature of international and domestic politics requiring a constant “on guard” mode. Yet this asymmetry cannot be maintained for long and, naturally, has to be counterbalanced.

The general objective of this paper is to illustrate, first of all, the dangerous nature of the neo-realist views as the foundation upon which both the world and national politics should be based. But, we also intend to adopt

a different way of criticism and apply a method which is nearly completely underrepresented in the existing debate. First, we largely focus on neo-realist scholars and disregard their non-academic apologists because of the heavy weight they attach to the premises of their theory by which political actions (e.g., NATO expansion) can be justified or totally criticized and rejected. Yet, as is commonly the case, we will not respond to political (empirical) criticism without pointing out those poor theoretical or methodological essentials of neo-realism (in fact, reasoning) that lead to obscure, confusing and often counterproductive if not destructive political suggestions. We will highlight how theoretical inconsistencies combined with the blind theoretical loyalty and sheer disregard of major factors that shape domestic and international politics lead to false statements that are inherently dangerous and become even more dangerous once translated and followed in the realm of policy-making.

Thus, we will extensively highlight the neo-realist interpretation of Russia's *modus operandi* since 2008 and its explanatory options vis-à-vis Russian behavior. Although the analysis of the fundamentals of neo-realist theory to prove the validity of neo-realist claims is the aim of another paper, we will conclude this paper by listing the key principles that neo-realist authors kept constant while referring to Russia's foreign policy and its reactions to the West's expansion in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet area. This will help us conduct a preliminary comparison of the claims of neo-realist authors with the very logic and principles of realist theory to reveal the degree of their inconsistency. It will also enable us to draw other theoretical schools into consideration as the main source of theoretical as well as methodological criticism and once again assess the level of generalisability; that is, the applicability of the neo-realist framework to modern world politics.

Neo-Realist Interpretation of the “Russian Headache” in International Relations

The major trigger which caused neo-realist authors to unleash a heated debate on Russian motives in constructing its geopolitical moves was the public upheaval in Ukraine that prompted pro-Russian President Yanukovich to flee and the Kremlin to annex Crimea and instigate a large-scale military confrontation in two regions of eastern Ukraine. The political response in Europe was divided and slow and was characterized by a

general reluctance to adopt radical punishment measures upon Russia and favored more measured sanctions while trying to figure out how to deal with the old-new revisionist power in Europe. Although a so-called reluctant camp must be clearly distinguished from the camp of “business as usual” or open “Russland Versteher” (a term adopted in Germany), the arguments and ways of reasoning they apply very much mimic the logic and justification lines widely used by neo-realist scholars; first and foremost, by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt.

Mearsheimer’s article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2014 had the effect of a bomb both in terms of its consequences and interpretations for political as well as academic debate.¹ In the very title of the article, the author made a clear statement confronting the liberal underpinning of the international order. It once again inflamed the old and deep reaching debate between the realist and liberal institutionalist international relations scholars. Yet, it also attempted to instrumentalize the crisis in Ukraine to present realism as the most powerful theoretical foundation in international relations with the best explanatory power for Russia’s aggressive foreign policy. The article offers a clear linkage between the theory and real-life politics, thus we pay particular attention to those paragraphs that reveal a particular relation to the realist theoretical model. Mearsheimer’s major claim is that:

“Putin’s pushback should have come as no surprise. After all, the West had been moving into Russia’s backyard and threatening its core strategic interests, a point Putin made emphatically and repeatedly.”²

He goes on and accuses the elites in the West of being blindsided by the liberal principles of international politics that in fact do not work and ignore the logic of realism, *realpolitik*; that is, Russia’s interests in its neighborhood. The key principles of his argumentation are as follows:

- **NATO and EU expansion** along with the attempts to promote democracy forced the Kremlin to respond militarily, Western diplomats did not understand Russian concerns and failed to recognize sent signals despite the brief Russo-Georgian war in 2008 that should have dispelled any “doubts about Putin’s determination to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO.”
- Each country and, especially, a great power decides what counts as a threat, is sensitive to these threats near its territory and, therefore,

any “hostile” expansion at the cost of reducing a so-called “**buffer zone**” (Ukraine, Georgia) would not be tolerated.

- Since “**might often makes right,**” small nations have to suffer due to the interests of great powers and the right of self-determination is meaningless and an abstraction once powerful states clash with weaker ones.

Even so, our objective is not to rectify all of the factual and logical errors Mearsheimer made in his article; some of them are too essential to be omitted, are derived from the mentioned key principles and are being used by other authors repeatedly to justify the Russian cause. So, for example, he refers to George Kennan’s interview in 1998 where he energetically opposed NATO expansion and its proponents and predicted Russia’s violent reaction to it by simply saying “we always told you that is how the Russians are.”³

Both Kennan and Mearsheimer are wrong from the realist as well as historical perspectives. The theoretical part will be closely analyzed in another paper where the fundamentals of realism and its branch of neo-realism will be highlighted. Yet, a more sober look must be paid to the Russian reaction to NATO expansion in late 1990s early 2000s. Historically, Russia did not react violently to several waves of NATO and EU enlargement (NATO-1999, 2004; EU-2004, 2007) until 2008 when it felt powerful enough to instigate a war with Georgia. The argument of the geographic proximity of expansion; that is, the closer to the border, the higher the probability of a violent reaction did not become realized in the case of the Baltic states bordering Russia which Mearsheimer admits and yet tries to attribute to the tiny size of these new NATO members. However, Georgia neither fits into the category of a big or medium-sized country (size, population, economy); it is, in fact, tiny - very much alike to the Baltic states and no serious analysis would ever certify Georgia as a noteworthy threat to Russia. The difference in the reaction (an aggressive war) can only be explained by the grown ability, power and self-confidence of which Russia had huge deficits in the late 1990s and early 2000s. So, if it is up to power alone (according to the author’s logic) to which the great powers resort in order to devise ways and extents of action (reaction), it is absolutely incomprehensible why the buffer zone in Eastern Europe, as a political and security area of uncertainty, had to be maintained in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the West had a clear advantage in its

power relation against Russia. It is even more incomprehensible why the West had to pay attention to the abstract concerns of a weak and declining superpower with an eye on even more abstract future power relations in which no guarantees of a stable democracy and resurgent autocracy would be provided.

Mearsheimer, like most realists, contended that the declining power did not need to be contained and the expansion would only give Moscow an incentive to cause trouble in Eastern Europe. History, however, has shown clear evidence that none of the expansion waves from 2008 to 2014 met with any serious resistance or troublemaking from the Russian side. The period after 2008, however, has been greatly marked by growing Russian assertiveness and internal meddling, not only in Eastern Europe but in Europe and other Western democracies worldwide.

Two final statements deliver the concluding analysis of Mearsheimer's article on the nature of events that focus on the following assumptions. The first is related to **the obsolescence of the liberal logic which the West has falsely embraced in international relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union and which it believed was powerful enough to replace the realist logic**. According to Mearsheimer, the Obama administration and the West had different playbooks in hand. They were following liberal ideas, often dismissing the threat of a more traditional view of power whereas the Kremlin has been acting in accordance with realist principles causing honest outrage.⁴ Again, small nations are prevented from making use of their right to choose alliances and justify their perception of the Russian threat. The analogy with Cuba fails badly due to the opposite experience as Castro brilliantly took the opportunity to solidify his country's security as guaranteed by the superpowers after the crisis. The argument that Russia had (has) no intention to create a greater Russia or even had no desire to annex Crimea before 2014, due to the lack of evidence, resources and military capabilities, falls apart on many accounts and again shows the empirical blindness and naivety of the theory-driven realist school.

Even if we disregard Russia's occupation of Georgian territories in 2008 and Putin's iconic attitude towards the collapse of the Soviet Union lamented as the "major geopolitical disaster of the century" that "became a genuine drama for the Russian nation" and a genuine Russian strive to restore its influence in the post-Soviet area (along with many other instances), the whole Russian strategy towards Ukraine was designed in such a way as

to keep it bound to Russia by economic and military mechanisms such as the Customs Union and the Black Sea Fleet agreement prolonged in 2010 until 2042.⁵ The pro-Russian regime of the ousted President Yanukovich guaranteed Russia's political control over Ukraine as well as the slow erosion of statehood and institutional mechanisms that would ultimately turn Ukraine into a failed state and render it to Russian mercy. Thus, there was no objective rationale for Moscow to intervene earlier before the radical change in 2014. Mearsheimer is also wrong, if not ignorant, when disqualifying Russia as a military power capable of taking on the entire Ukraine and certifying the Russian army as mediocre with "no signs of turning into a modern Wehrmacht." The overwhelming body of literature, reports and other open sources have been ringing alarm bells since 2008 as the Russian Ministry of Defense launched its military reform, unprecedented in scale and intensity, that turned the Russian armed forces into a qualitatively better military within a matter of years that was combat ready, better equipped, trained and able to employ new, more lethal weapons and systems massively introduced in military units from 2008.⁶ Furthermore, by instigating public disorder, disobedience and violent take-overs in local municipalities in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, the Kremlin clearly aimed at wrecking the statehood of its neighbor in order to deliver a final blow by whatever means would then be required. Widely termed as hybrid warfare, the true depth of its application had become known only after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. Although critically important for the neo-realist approach, Mearsheimer again shows little if any competence in military analysis since the entire military campaign in eastern Ukraine in 2014 proved the astounding ability of the Russian military to assemble a striking force undetected near the Ukrainian border on multiple occasions and employ it with such a high precision and lethality that even its limited intervention caused a significant operational defeat for the advancing Ukrainian forces on several occasions, effectively preventing them from establishing control over the breakaway regions.⁷

Second, Mearsheimer insists that due to the strategic importance of Ukraine for Russia, the Kremlin will be willing to absorb plenty of punishing measures and sanctions. On the other hand, he goes on to state that the **West cannot pursue a policy it cannot defend even if Russia were a rising power** which implies that the US and the European allies do not consider Ukraine at the core of their strategic interests and so will not be willing

to use military force to defend it. From that perspective, the buffer zone seems to be a logical solution given the much higher importance of the shared strategic interests of the great powers such as Russian assistance in Afghanistan, the nuclear deal with Iran and the stabilization efforts in Syria. Here, the author falls into the self-inflicted logical trap and unreasonable political naivety:

- If there was no reason for the West to expand because of a declining Russian threat (as claimed before), why is there still no reason for expansion if the Russian menace increases (rising power according to Mearsheimer)?
- The dilemma of the united action and resolute support of a new member of the Alliance had been a perennial feature of NATO. It started with the question of whether or not West Berlin was worth a nuclear exchange and continued until today with the collective concern of the Alliance about the ability of new members, and especially the Baltic states, to provide a meaningful defense against Russian forces.⁸ Yet, throughout NATO's genesis none of the justifications for non-expansion and the refusal of collective defense proved solid.
- In all of the issues stated by author where strategic cooperation was required, Russia has not provided any full-hearted support but only to the degree that secured its own interests and often directly disregarded US/Western interests (the siege of Aleppo and Russian military support to Damascus, the use of chemical weapons and growing evidence of illicit Russian support to the North Korean regime).⁹

In reality, Mearsheimer's call for cooperation rather appears to be a policy of unilateral concessions, a cooperation that only meets Russian interests and imitates a high relevance of the Russian contributions but yet in many respects resembles a strategy of silly appeasement.

Neo-Realist Laudacio and Kissinger's "Legacy"

Despite the obvious factual and logical flaws that Mearsheimer is not capable of rectifying, his article in *Foreign Affairs* found a strong laudacio by many scholars; not surprisingly, largely from the representatives of the neo-realist mainstream. So, for example, Robert D. Kaplan cherished him long before his article was published although admitting the inherent deficits that structural realism and its variation, offensive realism, are

incapable of bridging.¹⁰ In November 2014, Christian Hacke formulated his open support of the key principles of Mearsheimer's neo-realist logic in one of the major German political science publications platform, BPB (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung).¹¹ He literally repeats all of the well-known arguments while adding that the failure of the West to acknowledge Russian security sensitivities that paired with Western arrogance stimulated the establishment of an authoritarian regime in Moscow. Soon after Mearsheimer's article appeared, *The Nation's* editors published a joint analysis in which they very much in line with the prominent neo-realist scholar insisted on the centrality of Ukraine for Russia's strategic interests and favored a "buffer-zone" approach to calm down the security tension in Europe.¹² In February 2015, Mearsheimer added one more piece to the public discussion arguing that arming Ukraine is no solution and that even supported with Western military aid, the Ukrainian army would have no chance against the separatists and the Russian army holding their backs.¹³ In this op-ed, he no longer holds the argument about the lack of the intention and capabilities on the Russian side to take on Ukraine and destroy its army, which is a significant departure from his early claims in 2014, but the neutrality and buffer zone option remained the key message over time. He was further supported by another prominent realist author, Stephen M. Walt. In his first article in *Foreign Policy* he sided with Mearsheimer's stance on the existence of Russian vital interests and Ukraine as the core part of its orbit (sphere of influence) and the futility of military support for Ukraine in light of a much stronger Russian army.¹⁴ In the second opinion letter to the soon to become president of the US, Walt formulates five major pieces of advice for constructing a successful American foreign policy. Among these principles he argues that:

*"If top US and EU diplomats had understood this principle, they would not have been so surprised by Russia's heavy-handed behavior toward Ukraine, Georgia or even Syria. After all, Putin was just doing what America had done repeatedly in its own 'backyard'."*¹⁵

There is no surprise that the reference to security concerns and spheres of influence takes a paramount place in neo-realist writings. However, based on the balance of power principle in absolute terms as well as the principle of who is paying and who is willing to pay the bigger price to achieve strategic objectives, the established picture clearly favors the Western powers since, according to this logic, the much more powerful West can gradually increase the costs and let Russia "bleed" for its misbehavior by

still paying a much lesser price than the Kremlin would do. In June 2015, Mearsheimer coined the period between 1990 and 2008 as the “golden period” in Europe, peaceful and with no serious possibility of conflict between Russia and the West, save for what happened in the Balkans.¹⁶ It is hard to comprehend the logic the author applies here in many respects. First, why is the role of the conflicts in the Balkans, which on many occasions is being used as the exemplary case of Russian security sensitivity and policy reversal against the West, completely downplayed? This raises some very uncomfortable questions about the author’s lack of logical consistency and his inclination towards a factual and accommodation, if not selective, approach. Second, Mearsheimer claims that NATO has played the role of pacifier in Europe and the Russians were completely happy and not threatened in “any meaningful way” so that even the second tranche of enlargement in 2004, which brought the Baltic states into NATO, had not been viewed by the Kremlin as a mortal threat.¹⁷ Let alone the abundance of official records that illustrate a completely different picture of the Russian fury, rage and anger which resulted from the NATO operations in Kosovo as well enlargement decisions, it is astonishing how easily the author can use double standards by applying neo-realist logic, omitting major facts and disregarding other key principles widely applied in the very realist teaching. If the security concerns, geographic proximity to its border and post-Soviet legacy (sphere of influence; that is, the Russian term for it - the “near abroad”) were the decisive factors for the aggressive pushback, there is little if any explanation for Russia accepting the NATO membership of the Baltic states. This logic cannot be applied selectively, especially within the neo-realist framework due to its self-proclaimed generalisability potential. And, indeed, there is no valid explanation unless Mearsheimer and his supporters will take Russian internal politics, its economic dependence on the West and its military power into consideration. Once embedded in a power calculation and the analysis of the power constituting elements, it becomes absolutely obvious why in one case (2004 – the admission of the Baltic states to NATO) the Kremlin restrained itself to verbal protest and in another (2008 – the Bucharest declaration on the future NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine) chose preemptive action by launching military interventions.

In summer 2016, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt combined their efforts and once again reiterated neo-realist claims that instead of supporting NATO expansion the US had to reduce its military presence

in Europe, hand over European security to the Europeans and cultivate amicable relations with the Russians.¹⁸ Interestingly, the authors immediately acknowledge the inability of the Europeans to handle their own security which would increase the potential for crises. However, they make the surprising conclusion that these conflicts would not threaten US vital interests. This conclusion raises serious questions about the authors' logical consistency. They go even further and suggest that the US let Russia take the lead in Syria to stabilize it under Assad's control that would similarly pose little danger to US interests.¹⁹ It is beyond any rational understanding why a Europe sinking in crises and violence and allowing Russia to instrumentalize its leverage in Europe would not damage core US interests, given its global role, the reliance on European partners and the heavy economic interdependence. The constant reference to the US as a regional power (control of the Western Hemisphere) is a distinct characteristic of both authors but with no clear explanation of such a reductionist approach for a truly global superpower. So, for instance, at the Liberty Conference for International Students in 2016, John Mearsheimer stated that: *"One of the United States' primary national interests is to maintain its regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere."*²⁰ Let alone the absurdity of the claim that reduces the role of the US to a mere regional power (albeit hegemon), the web of global economic and security interdependence sinews objectively supports an opposing fact that the US has no less vital interests in Europe or the Middle East than in Chile or Argentina and that the vital interests of the US lie far beyond the scope of hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.

Once evaluating Russia's power, Mearsheimer comes to conclusion that it is a declining power with a shrinking population and very limited power projection capability.²¹ Surprisingly, however, he runs against the realist balance of power logic and offers a completely inconceivable solution of partnering with Russia to solve the crises in Syria and Iran. Once put in practice, it would mean a partnership with a weak and declining state, allowing Russia to save more resources, time and opportunity to preserve its shrinking dominance. In fact, it would manifest nothing else but the de facto recognition and support of Russia's spheres of influence. The same argument is put forth in a joint contribution drafted by Bacevich and Mearsheimer on Obama's legacy in January 2017.²²

Another no less "illuminating" explanation of Russia's behavior that fits very well into the neo-realist explanatory paradigm and, most importantly,

provides the credibility of the real-politics charisma, is formulated by Henry Kissinger himself. His particular contribution to the debate on a resurgent Russia, contrary to other authors mentioned afore, reflects an attempt to offer solutions, albeit with the same solid dose of the neo-realist “understanding” of Russian motivations.²³ In his article in the *Washington Post* in March 2014, he reacted to the events in Ukraine by promoting several key proposals:

- Ukraine should freely choose its political and economic association, yet be deprived from NATO membership.
- Neutrality, similar to Finland, would be an option.
- The relationship with Crimea should be put on a less “fraught basis” to make Russia recognize Ukraine’s sovereignty over the peninsula.

It is astonishing how precisely Henry Kissinger follows in the neo-realist footsteps and upholds the principle of unilateral action/concessions to be done exclusively by the West and Ukraine to make Russia cooperate. He largely blames the West for cooperation failure, implies Russia’s innocence and whitewashes its aggressive and revisionist nature. No less alarming is his acceptance of the Russian narrative by believing that the supposedly fragmented Ukrainian society would need reconciliation and that the Kremlin would be satisfied with the “final” settlement over the Black Sea Fleet and Ukraine’s avoidance of any institutional hostility that would make it possible to resolve the Crimea crisis; that is, reinforce its autonomy within the state of Ukraine. Furthermore, the permanent reference to “understanding” and “recognizing” Ukraine’s or Western interests has never been put on the same scale as is done with regard to Russia. It is always the West which should understand that Ukraine can never be just a foreign country for Russia.²⁴ In another interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* in November 2016, he again insisted on understanding Russia in order to bring Russia back to the international system and two years later again blamed the West for not admitting mistakes on its side.²⁵ Thus, it is not a coincidence that whereas other neo-realist scholars merely indicate, Henry Kissinger openly demands making a deal with Russia. His (neo-realist) assumption is that Russia’s interests, whether legitimate or not, must be recognized despite its declining power. On the other hand, the power status inequality deprives Ukraine and other post-Soviet republics from their right to seek better political and security arrangements despite their legitimate fears of Russia’s aggressive intentions. This ill-conceived

logic leads the former secretary of state to call the policy of unilateral concession (deal making under Russian terms) a solution and Russia a partner in the solution.

The problem with Kissinger's flawed logic is not the recognition of deal-making itself. A far bigger problem is his and his likely inability to recognize the obvious power imbalance between the West and Russia leading to faulty attempts to treat the Kremlin as if it were still a superpower similar to the Soviet Union within a functioning bipolar world order. During the Cold War, deal-making as well as spheres of influence made absolute sense although not always and not always kept (think about the fate of South Vietnam after the deal brokered by Kissinger himself). Kissinger, like other neo-realists, for some reasons does not regard Russia's attempts to restore its spheres of influences as the genuine Russian strategy, very much like the European politicians of the late 1930s were not willing to believe in Hitler's expansionist plans: "The annexation of Crimea was not a move toward global conquest. It was not Hitler moving into Czechoslovakia."²⁶ We do not know what other factual proof would be enough for neo-realist writers to be convinced of Russia's seriousness had Ukrainians not managed to contain Russian military advance in the country's eastern provinces. Yet astonishingly, Kissinger even uses the lousy pretext of the Sochi Olympic game preparation with billions of dollars spent to whitewash Russia's annexation of Crimea and present it as a progressive country:

*"So, it does not make any sense that a week after the close of the Olympics, Putin would take Crimea and start a war over Ukraine."*²⁷

It is beyond comprehension whether or not the Olympic games of 1936 in Germany can serve as strong enough evidence to make Kissinger rethink his own claims. However, what is definitely clear is that he still assumes that Russia belongs to the same camp of superpowers as the US (and the West as a whole) does. Further, he continues to deepen his flawed logic and assumes that Russia is instrumental in areas such as Iran and Syria, whereas Russia's willingness to cooperate and find a political solution there is close to zero and its influence is, in fact overrated, largely stimulated by the West's hesitant and sloppy actions. In the end, all of this makes him conclude that Russian aggression against Ukraine is nothing else but a "tactical escalation in a specific case" to be neglected for the sake of potential cooperation benefits with Russia.²⁸ In fact, all of the above said clearly indicates the bold readiness to sacrifice countries belonging to the so-called buffer zone for the objective of "neo-realist bipolar stability."

Despite frequent assertions of the need to ensure the independence of those countries, Kissinger, like many other neo-realist scholars, is not able to say when and what deal with an assertive and revisionist power will be final and forever guarantee peace and stability. History has shown many times that deal-making requires the resolve to uphold it by all means if necessary. And if one side is certain that the counterpart is not willing, not really interested in guaranteeing the deal agreed and is basically busy with saving face, a breach of the deal is inevitable. The failures of the Munich Agreement with Hitler in 1938, the Paris Agreement with North Vietnam in 1974, the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, the Six Point Agreement with Russia and Georgia in 2008 or the Minsk Agreements in 2014 are clear consequences of the reluctance of the West to follow its commitments.

So, if Kissinger and other neo-realists demand another deal with Russia as the only solution for peace and stability, they must also presuppose that the West is willing to guarantee it. In essence, the possibility of deal-making requires two sides **equally** interested in its implementation. However, if according to them there is a clear imbalance of the degree (vitality) of interests in “buffer zone” countries between the West and Russia, clearly favoring Russia, their own logic of deal-making becomes nothing else but a dangerous delusion with grave security consequences destined to fail from the very beginning. Consequently, if the neo-realist logic itself is objectively against the prospects of making a deal with Russia, it is inconceivable why neo-realist writers still insist on it. This kind of logical faultiness turns the neo-realist option to remedy the structural instability of the international system into a catalyst of even more dangerous developments, “confronting” the more aggressive side (Russia) from the very beginning with a policy of unilateral concession.

Conclusion

Once dealing with the Ukraine crisis and the Russian response, neo-realist authors reveal a strong similarity in their political demands as well as their basic behavioral principles. However, these principles very often run against the very realist logic as well as empirical evidence. Especially, empirical evidence does not often support the selective use of facts and their confusing interpretations that turn the neo-realist logic self-contradictory.

The centrality of security interests and the relevance of the near periphery; that is, the buffer zone or sphere of influence, is clearly recognized along

with the willingness and the resolve to pay a price for vital interests. However, the mere reference to these aforementioned elements does not provide sufficient empirical evidence and is less able to explain the different outcomes of similar processes without a closer look at the role domestic politics and power relations play in strategic and foreign policy decision-making.

The neo-realist writers have a natural aversion to the mosaic of internal politics and the political construction of states (nature) and the only factor that is crucial in international politics is the power relation. Yet, if the relative as well as absolute power relation is clearly in favor of Western powers with the clear tendency of increasing this advantage, it is puzzling why neo-realist scholars end up with suggestions to cooperate with Russia and respect its interests; that is, spheres of influence, which turns out to be nothing else but contributing to the very survival of the declining competitor. Solutions provided by neo-realist writers clearly ignore the self-determination right of the post-Soviet countries to choose those political and security arrangements they regard best for themselves. In an interview with *Spiegel*, Kissinger even insisted on telling Ukrainians that they are not free to decide their own future.²⁹ Combined with the paranoia for deal-making with Russia, this approach for upholding international security, in fact, develops into an effective mechanism for sliding into the mode of successive unilateral concessions. In December 2016, the *Independent* was reporting about the “master plan” Kissinger was drawing for Ukraine to advise the elected president Trump that would involve the US accepting Crimea to become a part of Russia in exchange for removing the military and the rebels from eastern Ukraine.³⁰ This in turn is clear evidence of how neo-realists accommodate themselves with the growing appetite of an assertive power (Russia) by basically offering more for another attempt at reaching another final deal.

The motives for such an approach are logically inconsistent and faulty. Yet, they might have their roots deeply embedded in the theoretical foundation of neo-realism in which the concept of bipolarity takes the central place. The bipolar world order was exactly the period during which Henry Kissinger spent his active career by holding key positions that enabled him to be involved in a number of strategic deal-makings. Despite theoretical assumptions or subjective professional nostalgia, it is not at all clear why neo-realist scholars depart from the rationalist ground and insist on “understanding” Russia by overestimating it which is just another variation

of misunderstanding as Niall Fergusson rightly notes.³¹ This is even more inconceivable as neo-realists do not provide any clarity about what the West would get in return (if anything) for the policy of concessions they so strongly favor and advance.

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