

Hard Power Theory in Contemporary International Wars: An Analysis of the Russian–Ukrainian War



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Abstract:

This study examines the evolution of power as an instrument in international conflicts, examining its transformation from hard power to soft power, and the subsequent revival of its traditional form in the contemporary world, particularly with the onset of the Russian war on Ukraine. It also seeks to describe, interpret, and critically assess the intellectual positions of the realist perspective that explains international conflicts based on the inherently evil nature of human beings, and to explore the relationship between these foundations and the exercise of power in inter-state relations.

The study aims to provide a theoretical analysis of the motivations behind the revival of hard power and the current international circumstances surrounding it. It also seeks to identify Russia's reasons and objectives for entering this war, as well as the domestic and international actors involved. Moreover, the research analyzes Russia's rational discourse and aims to draw theoretical conclusions necessary for reconsidering power equilibrium.

Keywords: power , hard power ,soft power , Russian- Ukrainian war .

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Introduction:

Among the most prominent variables in the analysis of international relations is "power," a concept that has long been employed to interpret various political phenomena. Power is seen, at times, as a driver of human behavior, at other times as an end in itself, and sometimes, as a means to achieve specific objectives. Since the Enlightenment, academic studies have consistently analyzed power and its causes in the formation of states and the evolution of societies. Thinkers from diverse intellectual traditions have sought to conceptualize power in ways that support present or future strategic positions. This intellectual engagement has led to the development of multiple theoretical frameworks that interpret power from different angles, raising key questions such as: When should power be employed? Who is entitled to exercise it? And most importantly: What type of power should be used in the current era?

There are several justifications for conducting this study, but we summarize them in the urgent need to adopt a realist analysis of material power in order to better understand the causes of today's increasingly sensitive conflicts. This need is heightened by the proliferation of academic research emphasizing the "softness" of power and exaggerating its advantages—such as lower cost and reduced harm to human life—which has, in turn, overshadowed the significance of material (hard) power.

Research Objectives:

- To achieve a clearer understanding of the concept of power and its transformations in international relations by clarifying its nature.
- To identify and assess the most significant forms of power and determine which are most realistic and effective in achieving political objectives.
- To analyze the Russian–Ukrainian war, its manifestations, and its impacts on various actors through the lens of hard power utilization.

Research Problem: How did Russia conduct its war against Ukraine through the use of hard power?

Sub-questions:

- What is meant by "power"?
- What are the element of Russian power, and what are its military objectives in the war on Ukraine?

Hypothesis: Hard power is the only tool through which states can achieve their military objectives in wars against one another.

Methodology:

- **Power Analysis Method:** This method—one of the primary approaches in geopolitical analysis—is employed to examine the "powers" under study: Russia as one belligerent party, Ukraine as the second, and other secondary actors with distinct motivations and objectives supporting the war. Power analysis focuses on assessing the components and capabilities of power, along with their strengths and weaknesses, in order to understand state capacities and behavior.
- **Comparative Method:** The comparative method is used to analyze political and security phenomena from various perspectives, notably by comparing a single state's policies across different time periods. This study applies the comparative method to investigate the differences and similarities between Russia's policies before and after its war on Ukraine. This will help identify the key distinctions between "hard state power" aimed at direct military confrontation and soft power strategies.

1. Defining the Concept of Power and Hard Power in International Relations:

a. The Concept of Power and Its Transformations:

Joseph Nye defines power as the ability to influence the behavior of others through coercion or material incentives. It has two main sources: military and economic power. This influence can be exerted in two main ways—either through coercion (the "stick") or inducement (the "carrot") (A, 2018, p-8)

Power refers to the ability of an international actor to utilize both tangible and intangible resources to influence the outcomes of events in the international system, in ways that enhance its position and relations within that system. In his interpretation of this definition, Saad Haqi Tawfiq argues that it highlights several important characteristics of influence among actors in various forms. In its first form, power is a means through which international actors interact with one another. In another form, it is a natural political attribute that stems from primary resources. Alternatively, power can also be viewed as an instrument used to exert influence over other actors. (A K. , 2019, p 160-161)

According to Khaled Al-Hariri in his book titled *The Concept of Power in International Politics*, Aristotle defined power as the capacity possessed by certain members of a politically organized society—one that is naturally divided into rulers and subjects—to make others do what they would not do of their own accord.

For Thomas Hobbes, power refers to the means or resources available at a given time to attain an identifiable future good. (W, 2020/2021,p14)

Meanwhile, Max Weber defines power as the probability that an individual within a social relationship will be able to impose their will despite resistance from others, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests. (A A.-T. , 2019,p31)

it becomes evident from the various definitions of power presented above that power does not conform to a single, fixed concept. Rather, it varies depending on academic perspectives and the historical contexts that shaped these writings. Nonetheless, one of the earliest and most prominent definitions in the analysis of power within international relations was offered by the American scholar Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1981). Niebuhr drew a connection between two fundamental aspects of human nature: life and power. He argued that the possession of life inherently necessitates the possession of power, and this outcome can only be realized through the subjugation of others. Such subjugation, according to Niebuhr, is intrinsic to human beings, who are burdened by original sin and inherently inclined toward evil. It is this tendency toward (Raslan, 1986,p 124).

b. Theoretical Motivations for the Revival of Hard Power

If we trace the historical evolution of the concept of power—from Thucydides to Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes—it becomes evident that power functions as an intermediate variable between human nature, which is inherently driven by evil, and an international environment marked by conflict. In other words, power initially emerged in a "hard" form, given that the actor exercising power was conceived as a rigid and forceful entity.

Hans Morgenthau approached the analysis of international relations from the premise that the global system is characterized by a perpetual struggle for power. He concurred with E.H. Carr in asserting that the driving force and core mechanism of political processes is the politics of power. (Ali , 2023,p254) ,There exists a tension within human nature between the instinct for power and the instinct for peaceful coexistence. According to Hobbes, this contradiction necessitates the construction of a higher framework that ensures security for all—one that establishes an absolute authority capable of preventing violence (Hitti, 1985,p 86) ,however, violence remains a constant feature of the international environment and has not been eliminated, as evidenced by the proliferation of wars at all levels. Hard power, with all its attributes, has been revived at the expense of other forms of power once assumed to be more relevant—such as soft and smart power. The objective that realist thinkers, particularly Hobbes, sought to establish—namely, an absolute power capable of preventing violence—has not been achieved. In fact, soft power has not prevented violence; it has rather made it more complex.

In a seminal article, Robert Cox argued that theory is always for someone and for some purpose—in other words, theorizing is a political act. Theories often serve to fulfill people's expectations and objectives. Theory is thus shaped by the theorist's position in time and space. Accordingly, although all traditional paradigms—especially realism, liberalism, and the English School—claim universality, Acharya and Barry Buzan contend that, in reality, these paradigms speak on behalf of the West and aim to preserve its power, prosperity, and influence. It is therefore logical that alternative theories should emerge from contexts such as China, Japan, or any other non-Western state (Raslan, 1986) (Pinar & Kürşad, 2023, p 222).

Accordingly, it can be concluded that the hard power currently exercised by the United States—through its support for Ukraine with advanced weaponry to deter Russian incursions, and through NATO and allied backing of Ukrainian defense—represents a resurgence of hard power from a "Western perspective." Hard power, which is based on material capabilities and the use of force and direct confrontation, remains the primary lens through which Western political thought interprets and responds to conflict—not soft power. Although the indicators of soft power—popularized during the era of globalization and technological advancement—emphasize influence and persuasion of the other party, such persuasion typically targets a non-hostile actor that poses no direct threat to security. Soft power instruments are not deployed against actors actively developing military capabilities, such as Ukraine. While Russia possesses indirect sources of influence, including shared language, religion, geographic proximity, and technological weaponry, these were insufficient to sway Ukrainian society. Instead, Russia resorted to direct material warfare in an attempt to force Ukraine into submission and alignment with the Russian sphere.

According to George Kennan, human nature is fundamentally irrational and inclined toward violence. The conflicts that arise between states are increasing and proliferating due to the diverse economic and cultural factors that differentiate them (Hitti, 1985, p 35). Human motivation toward conflict and war is realistically manifested through the exercise of power. Power, in this sense, reflects the nature of the human psyche. Hard power, in particular, transforms Hobbes's theoretical assumption into an empirical reality, as it provides a framework for explaining the wars waged among humans. The conclusion, then, is that any form of non-hard power—regardless of its label or method of application—is essentially an attempt to negate human nature. Therefore, the fundamental truth of human nature must be acknowledged and revived.

Peace is not the natural condition among states; rather, the default state is that states resort to war whenever they possess the means to do so. This view of

power utilization is supported by Al-Farabi, who asserted that relations are, by nature, founded upon coercion and domination (Ben Nahar., 2016,p 144).

If we accept this view that the continuity of violence is an inherent human trait, then efforts to suppress and reject this violence in pursuit of peace actually become the primary reason behind the eruption of even more violent wars in the future. Domination and coercion among humans occur according to certain rules, yet the development of alternative theories of power—other than hard power (i.e., coercion as defined by Al-Farabi)—has not eliminated physical violence. Rather, these theories have merely regulated it and determined who is entitled to be powerful and who is permitted to exercise power over others.

Today, the United States is powerful enough to deploy aircraft carriers to the Middle East, just as Russia and China can do the same. Yet many other states are incapable of doing so—not because they lack power, but because they lack the *legitimacy* to use it. This is precisely what soft power theory has sought to establish: a framework that legitimizes the exercise of power by some, while implicitly denying it to others.

2. The Russian-Ukrainian War (Motivations and Objectives)a. The article's size:

a. Geopolitical Motivations for the Outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian War

On the other hand, the accession of seven countries—formerly part of the Soviet Union—to NATO in 2004 prompted a strong Russian stance opposing any attempt to include Ukraine in the alliance, warning that such a move could lead to the possibility of war against it (Abdel Aal Sayed Ramadan, 2022,p 404)

Russia's security move came in response to the growing friendly and military relations between the United States and both Georgia and Ukraine. In its security document, Russia requested the signing of two security agreements with the U.S., stipulating the non-deployment of any heavy military weapons in countries bordering Russia. However, in 2021, the U.S. and European forces began amassing troops near Ukraine's borders. Since 2014, the United States has provided Kyiv with \$205 billion in military aid (Abdel Shafi, 2022,p 7)

The Russian military stance was a reaction to the growing presence of U.S. military forces within Ukrainian territory—an act that, in military literature, is interpreted as an attempt to threaten Russia's security by encircling its influence along its geographical borders.

The integration of formerly soviet states into European institutions is viewed from the European perspective as an effort to secure those countries, expand

democratic values, and promote the peace enjoyed by European nations. (Mukhaimer, 2023,p 17)

Theoretically, this step can be interpreted as a revival of liberal values, which aim to provide lasting security within states that follow the same American and Western system, and to spread Western ideology. Ukrainians view Russia as a dictatorial state that seeks to fuel internal conflict, division, and to undermine national unity and cohesion. This perception calls for defending their land and identity against Russia.

From a realist perspective, as explained by Kenneth Waltz, war is interpreted through both sufficient and proximate causes. The sufficient causes are directly related to the interactions and relations between the warring parties themselves, while the proximate causes are structural, tied to the dynamics of the international system, which explains war in a broader sense. (Belkhairat, 2022, 247)

b. Russia's Objectives in Waging War on Ukraine"

It is important to emphasize that the current Russian-Ukrainian had already begun to take shape in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the armed invasion of Donbas. Russia's war against Ukraine is an act of aggression led by an imperial and vengeful power. There is a clear aggressor—Russia—and a clear victim—Ukraine. This reality inevitably creates opposing interpretations of the war: for Ukraine, the war is about survival as a nation and as a state; for Russia, as a dictatorship, it is a war of destruction against Ukraine.

Ukraine represents a security zone for Russia along its western borders. Russia views Ukraine as a buffer state against any potential Western incursion toward Moscow. During World War II, Germany had to cross 1,600 kilometers of Ukrainian territory to reach Moscow, a factor that contributed to its failure in the war (The war in Ukraine and its geopolitical impacts on regional countries and Afghanistan., 2022) Ukraine holds strategic importance for Russia due to its geographical location—it is the largest country by area along Russia's borders. Russia sees the need to shape Ukraine into a buffer state, which is why it firmly rejects any move for Ukraine to join the European Union or NATO. This pushed Russia to impose the option of turning Ukraine into a neutral state in order to maintain its own security stability. (Muhammad Bashir, 2023,p 90-91)

Any presence of Western armed forces on Ukrainian territory poses a threat to Russia's security. Ukraine's accession to the European Union and NATO represents a new form of obstruction to Russia's control over a geographic area that was once under its influence.

Map 01: Illustration of the regions under Russian control in Ukraine



Source: BBC News, *Russia and Ukraine: Maps showing the latest developments in the war and on the ground: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/world-61382181>

Ukraine inherited from the Soviet Union all the bases of the Black Sea Fleet, a fleet of strategic bombers, and missiles armed with up to 1,700 nuclear warheads, as well as the two early-warning stations for nuclear attacks located in Crimea and the port of Sevastopol. These represent the most important strategic points for Russia, as without them, the missile defense system would lose visibility over the southwestern sector of Ukraine (Taleb, 2022, p82)

Therefore «Russia adopts a strategic perspective that prioritizes the defense of its vital sphere of influence, as Ukraine's geography facilitates a potential U.S. encroachment, enabling it to encircle Russia due to the flat terrain (Taleb, 2022, p83) , therefore, Russia's rationality in deciding to go to war is justifiable. The war on Ukraine, if not launched at that time, would have inevitably started later under conditions in which Russia would have been nearly paralyzed by the influx of U.S. weapons encircling its borders from within Ukrainian territory.

The regional and global systems—including the geopolitical, geostrategic, geocultural, and geo-economics orders—have become more distinguishable in the

era of globalization than ever before. In this context, the war in Ukraine marks the beginning of a new chapter in the regional order, as we are living in a period where no state can remain isolated from its neighbors and still enjoy complete security and stability within its own borders. Mutual influence and interdependence among states and their surrounding regions have become defining characteristics of this era. (Alibah, 2023, p8)

However, separation among states is not a traditional feature, and globalization has eliminated this notion. The claim suggesting the end of borders is unrealistic—it is merely an assumption. While globalization has opened the door for exchange among various peoples and nations, it has preserved the distinctiveness and specific characteristics of each state. Russia differs from Ukraine in its environment and internal structure. The war confirmed the assumption that sharing language, history, culture, and religion does not prevent conflict. Peoples primarily belong to their state, and the state remains the central unitary actor in international relations.

Russia and Ukraine together account for a significant share of global exports of many strategic commodities. Russia is a key supplier of natural gas and the second-largest exporter of crude oil. It represents approximately 25% of global natural gas exports, 18% of coal exports, 14% of palladium exports, and 11% of crude oil exports. As a result, potential risks from the conflict could sharply reduce the supply of these goods, thereby disrupting construction, petrochemical industries, and transportation—ultimately dampening global economic growth.

Both Russia and Ukraine also play a vital role in global food markets. They are major producers of wheat, barley, and corn, jointly accounting for an average of 27%, 23%, and 15% of global exports, respectively. Together, they also represent nearly two-thirds of global sunflower oil exports, with Ukraine alone accounting for about 42% and Russia 21%. Therefore, the war is expected to have significant global repercussions, particularly in terms of food security. It is triggering a food crisis due to rising food prices and potential shortages in many countries that rely on exports from Russia or Ukraine (UNICEF, 2022)

3. The Employment of Hard Power in the Context of the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

a. Resorting to Armed Force as a Pragmatic Approach

Does the use of hard power in war imply the abandonment of soft power due to its inability to achieve the objectives of war?

The U.S. War College offers a concise definition of power as: *'the capabilities a state uses to achieve national objectives during international conflict'* (Boumediene, 2020/2021, p17), **state** can only employ its military capabilities in an

international conflict when pursuing vital, existential objectives. The Russian war on Ukraine necessitates the use of direct hard power—military force aimed at swiftly neutralizing the adversary's strength.

In contrast, Ukraine has received substantial support from European Union countries, being perceived as a state under attack and thus deserving of solidarity and assistance from the democratic world (Kleczkowska , 2023,p 291-292), in other words, the conflicting parties have employed military power as it is the only form of power capable of deterring rival attempts to achieve similar objectives.

Map No. 02: Areas Controlled by Ukrainian and Russian Forces in Ukraine – August 22, 2024



Source :

<https://www.alhurra.com/ukrainewar/2024/09/11> , 12-09-2024

A closer look at the map illustrating Russian control reveals the spread of Russian forces in areas not far from the regions recently annexed—extending from Luhansk to Kherson—forming a belt along the Russian-Ukrainian border. This Russian control, which necessitates the use of armed ground forces and sustained air and ground bombardment, enabled Russia to establish initial dominance before pushing further into Ukrainian territory. This indicates that military power can achieve security objectives within a short timeframe.

Thus, hard power proves to be significantly more effective than soft power; while military capabilities can promptly fulfill state objectives, soft power requires much longer—perhaps even decades—making it less justifiable in matters of security and territorial control.

In this context, researcher Adriana Isabella Barbosa notes in her article titled *'The Russian War on Ukraine: What Role Could the United Nations Play in Overcoming This Global Anxiety?'* that Russia's war on Ukraine is not unlike the U.S. war on Iraq. Yet, no sanctions were imposed on the United States or the United Kingdom, whereas the U.S. and European countries have imposed economic sanctions on Russia and refrained from purchasing Russian gas, oil, and coal (Sá Leitão Di Pasquale, 2024, p 88) Economic pressure is classified as a form of hard power. While the causes and motivations for war may vary, the methods of applying economic pressure tend to be similar. The United States and the European Union imposed economic sanctions on Iran, and these sanctions remain in effect, having significantly impacted the Iranian economy. The same actors imposed similar sanctions on Russia following its war on Ukraine. In more precise terms, hard power includes direct forms of pressure that can achieve swift outcomes, whereas soft power lacks such mechanisms and, consequently, fails to produce immediate, tangible results.

Russia's military power in its war against Ukraine compelled the United States—being a dominant global actor shaping international politics—to respond with boycotts and economic sanctions, in addition to military measures. U.S. military support for Ukrainian forces represents a military confrontation that illustrates the limitations of soft power, which remains more of an experimental form of modern influence —ineffective when confronting an adversary engaged in full-scale war."

b. The Outcomes of Hard Power Deployment in the Russia–Ukraine War.

The material and moral outcomes of the Russia–Ukraine war cannot be definitively measured, as the conflict is still ongoing and a full assessment remains impossible. However, it is possible to outline some of the key current consequences for both Russia and Ukraine, as well as for the states aligned or allied with either side.

– Russia's military capabilities have been significantly weakened in the face of Ukrainian resilience and heroism. The Ukrainian army has reportedly destroyed a large part of the Russian invading forces, initially estimated at around 200,000 troops. According to figures released by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, more than 292,000 Russian occupiers have been killed—representing nearly one-third of Russia's pre-invasion military strength. Additionally, Ukraine claims to have

destroyed over 5,000 tanks, 9,500 armored vehicles, more than 7,000 artillery systems, nearly 550 air defense systems, and around 650 aircraft. (keyeydon & troyan, 2023,p 31)

- The realist theory considers power to be the fundamental principle governing relations among states. It argues that interstate competition inevitably leads to conflicts and wars, and that politics only becomes effective when grounded in power, particularly when it serves the state's core interests. This realist view, strongly supported by Hans Morgenthau, affirms that military force is among the most important material factors shaping a state's political power (perepelytsia & hryhorii, 2021,p 23) his approach was soon diminished with the emergence of constructivist theory, institutional liberalism, and later the ideas of Joseph Nye. Attempts to exert influence through indirect means yielded little more than psychological control over populations with weak national affiliation. It thus became necessary to revive and reconsider Morgenthau's views on power. While power today has taken on modern forms capable of altering the behavior of others and compelling them to adopt unwanted positions in the name of the 'international community'—rather than the interests of a single state—this is not applicable when it comes to matters of national security, particularly for Russia or any other sovereign state.
- The outcome of the Russia–Ukraine war has been largely negative, with heavy losses not only for Russia but also for Ukraine and its allies. The establishment of U.S. military bases in Ukraine and their orientation toward Russia may indeed be considered a form of power. However, the true objective behind this was not Ukraine's national interest, but rather the amplification of U.S. power and global presence. This realist reorientation of military power in the 21st century represents a security slip—one whose consequences will ultimately backfire on Ukraine, even if it manages to claim victories in its battles against Russia.
- Half a year into the Russian war on Ukraine, Russia managed to annex four provinces: Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson. Russia was primarily focused on the Donbas region. However, during this intense Russian focus on Donbas, Ukraine succeeded in reclaiming 3,000 square kilometers of territory, aided by substantial U.S. support in the form of strategic heavy weaponry and missile defense systems, which inflicted significant losses on Russian forces in Donbas (Alibah, 2023,p 8),the outcomes achieved by Russia in its war are interpreted by global public opinion as acts of humanitarian brutality against an unarmed and free people in their own country. The occupation of one state by another contradicts international law and human rights. Conversely, from the Russian perspective, these actions are seen as necessary to protect its national security and safeguard its interests from Western encroachment

on its territories. This divergence in viewpoints between Russia and the Western alliance (including the United States and the European Union) stems from differing goals and interests. (Mukhaimer, 2023,p 11).

- i f we apply a comparative study between Russia's foreign policy before and after the war—that is, before and after its implementation of hard power—we observe the following differences:
- Before the war, Russia's foreign policy was directed outward, toward external regions. After the war, its capabilities were redirected toward its regional borders. Russia's strength in establishing friendly relations, building a favorable global image, and engaging in cooperative relations did not yield direct benefits in the same way the war produced immediate results.
- The Russian discourse addressed to the West prior to the war was a rational one, focused on building the foundations of peace. However, the discourse after the war, while still rational, shifted to prioritize Russia's national interests over the achievement of global peace and security."

Conclusion:

- Power today transcends its direct material concept, which is traditionally represented by the use of available tools and capabilities to achieve objectives. This concept has become intertwined with non-material elements—namely, the ability to influence through persuasion and the transformation of other parties' positions via soft standards—coinciding with the emergence of new forms of communication, exchange, and cooperation, and the diminishing role of geography and borders.
- Hard power, which had previously declined in favor of the rise of soft power, has resurfaced within the sphere of international relations, explaining contemporary phenomena of conflict and war between states, regions, and ethnicities. This resurgence has reasserted the hypothesis that military force is more persuasive and realistic than other forms of power.

The Russia–Ukraine war is one of the modern conflicts waged between two democratic states, undermining the theory of "democratic peace," which posits that democratic nations are less likely to resort to violence. On a realist level, it is a war led by a major power seeking to prevent the encroachment of another global power into its geographic sphere of influence—namely, the installation of weapons along the Russia–Ukraine land border. This conflict is, in essence, a U.S.–Russia war executed by Ukraine in pursuit of its short-term national interests and the long-term strategic goals of the United States to contain Russia.

- The resurgence of hard wars between states does not necessarily imply the exclusion of smart and soft power, but rather a rejection of assumptions that advocate disarmament and an exclusive reliance on indirect influence.

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