

**THE AMERICAN ROLE IN FUELING THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS AND  
EUROPEAN-NATO DISILLUSIONMENT**

**BY**

**BIBI-FAROUK FAROUK IBRAHIM, AL'AMIN MAINA AND MAIKARFI  
EPHRAIM**

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS,**

**UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA, ABUJA**

## **Abstract**

*The Ukrainian crisis has recreated a new change in Russo-American relations, which manifest yet in another dangerous cold war-like situation and making the war an expanded proxy one. Power tussle between the two powerful states is palpable as well as scramble for influence and relevance. The United States and NATO allies try to expand the North Treaty Organization (NATO), albeit they promised not to expand an inch eastward but they reneged their promise and continued to expand even towards the Russian backyard. The paper adopts the library instrument of data collection from already existing information from books, journals, newspapers, periodicals and magazines. Findings show that, Ukraine which also wants democracy, began to make moves of joining NATO to the provocation of Russia which led to Russia finally attacking Crimea in 2014 and in February 2022. The paper employed the theory of offensive realism and arrived at the conclusion that the crisis in Ukraine continues to escalate as a result of continued interference of the United States and European NATO allies. The paper recommends that to bring an end to all forms of crisis in Ukraine, the United States should hand off its intention of allowing Ukraine to join NATO, among other things.*

**Keywords:** American role; Ukraine; crisis; disillusionment; proxy war; denazification

## **Introduction**

The Ukrainian crises can be described as a tussle for supremacy between two world powers, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Russian Federation for geopolitical strategy and future geo-economic orientation of Ukraine (Dmitri, 2014). As the cold war draws to an end, soviet leaders were optimistic that U.S forces will remain in Europe and NATO will remain intact without nursing any intention to expand its territories; this wasn't the case as NATO under the Clinton administration began to push outward towards the expansion of NATO. The Russian federation in trying to wade off any western influence in Eastern Europe, evident from NATO actions tried to attract Ukraine and other former soviet states to a marriage on the premises of establishing the Eurasian Union rather than retrying to re-create the Soviet Union. This union is expected to give Russia enormous bargaining power and other important benefits amongst its continental neighbors.

According to John (2014), this expansion began in the year 1999 where nations such as Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were brought under NATO influence to become its members and again, in the year 2004, NATO went further to expand conquering nations like Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Moscow seeing current happenings complained bitterly and stated that there will be consequences if NATO were to come anywhere close to the Russian border as stated by Boris Yeltsin, the then Russian president that "the flames of war could burst out across the whole of Europe." Russia became relaxed as noted by Mearsheimer (2016), as the then NATO expansionist movement posed no threat to its sovereignty and existence as none of the NATO new members shared a border with the Russian federation.

It was conspicuous that in April 2008, during its summit in Bucharest, NATO considered admitting Georgia and Ukraine into its fold. The United States under George W. Bush supported this move while France and Germany disapproved the move, knowing fully what could be the results of such actions (John, 2014). Due to

the foregoing, a formal declaration of their membership was suspended but yet NATO boldly released a statement which states that “Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO. Moscow did not welcome this development and in reaction, the Russian federation deputy foreign minister, Alexander Grushko as captured in the work of Anastasia (2015) stated that “Georgia and Ukraine membership to NATO is a huge strategic mistake which would come with serious consequences for Pan-European security.” Putin, the president of Russia in response maintained that the admission of these countries into NATO was a direct threat to Russia and went further to hint that any such move will bring to an end the existence of Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014).

The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 should have served as deterrence and put to rest any intention of Ukraine from joining NATO but NATO continued with its expansionist movement and in 2009, welcomed Albania and Croatia into its fold as new members (Stephen, peter et al, 2015). The European Union (EU) according to Mearsheimer (2014) was also marching eastward in attempt to create an eastern partnership with countries such as Ukraine with the aim of integrating them into the EU economy. This move was opposed by Russia as it was seen as hostile to the federation interest. Russia through its foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov accused the EU of trying to create a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe which it will reject by any means necessary.

The Western world had continued to spread western values and democracy in Ukraine through aids and other relief processes. The US according to its Assistant Secretary of State (European and Eurasian affairs), Victoria Nuland, has spent over 5billion dollars between 1991 and 2013 to help Ukraine in actualizing the future it deserves (Dmitri, 2014). According to him, the US initiated several policies through which it was able to carry out its expansionist tendencies which the Russian government feared that their country might be next. This position was captured by Gershman (2013) when he noted that “Ukraine’s choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism which Putin represents.” He went further to state that Russia will have to make a choice and Putin may find himself at the receiving end not only at the near border but within Russia

itself. Now the question left to be asked is how did Russia find itself at the stage of fear against EU expansionist movement and what role has the US played in all this?

### **Ukraine before the crises.**

Ukraine which got independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991 had began to create a modern national identity for itself. At the end of the First World War, Ukraine had tried struggled for its own state away from the Soviet Union but failed; this led to its western part becoming a part of Poland while the eastern part was annexed to the Soviet Union (Michal, 2016). This complicated history influenced the division among the Ukrainians as described by Huntington (1996) as “future conflicts will occur along cultural lines that separates the civilization in Ukraine. The western part Ukraine had enjoyed western civilization while eastern Ukraine was civilized under the Russian and orthodox faith”. This is why the identity of Ukrainians is very complex.

To show how the Ukrainians wanted unity among themselves, a nationwide referendum was carried out in December, 1991 where over 90% of the citizens voted for independence (Ialpychak, 1991). The follow up to the referendum was the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurance entered into by Russia, Ukraine, United States and the United Kingdom entered into in December, 1994 agreeing that these signatories will respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine as an independence state (memorandum on security, 1994). The first decade (1991-2004) of Ukraine independence was however a lost as its economy was known for widespread corruption, weak economy and poor democratic development. In 2004, Viktor Yanukovich won the election to succeed Leonid Kuchma but the election outcome was accompanied by crises of opposition which led to the famous orange revolution and forced the Supreme Court of Ukraine to order a new election.

The opposition presidential candidate, Viktor Yushchenko won the re-election and the Ukrainians saw that to be a success and victory for the common man. The happiness and hope of the people for democratic development under the new leadership was short lived as leaders of the new government began to engage in internal crises which paralyzed the administration (Michal, 2016). The present government due to its inability to live up to the expectation of the people was voted out

of office and Viktor Yanukovich was once again made president. The new president as noted by Michal (2016) in Michael (2017) officially supported closer ties with the European Union (EU) but made it very clear that the Russian Federation is the most important partner to Ukraine.

Ukraine was however placed in a difficult position from the moment when the Russian president, Vladimir Putin announced the plan to create Eurasian Economic Union. Yanukovich, President of Ukraine has always played in between Russia and the US, trying to get as much as he could from both parties but now knowing that it's practically impossible to balance in between the two as Ukraine cannot belong to the two sides (NATO and Eurasia) and to remain neutral, which is also not an option in the long run (Michal, 2016). With this development, Ukraine finally opted for a closer tie with the Russians thereby rejecting all agreements on closer trade relations with the EU under President Viktor Yanukovich.

## **Material and Method**

The methodology adopted in this research is the secondary methodology which explores materials from divergent sources like journals, books, periodicals, newspapers, governmental reports among others. The methodology of this research is descriptive in nature and adopts the content analytical instruments in order to make it scientific.

## **Theoretical Consideration**

Several scientific theories have emerged to provide explanations to why the United State has been in power struggle with Russia over Ukraine. These theories are derived from various theoretical submissions from different spheres of life and disciplines. This paper whose main aim is to examine the role the United States (US) has played in the Ukrainian crises/war vis a vis the struggle for supremacy between the US and Russia will adopt the theory of offensive realism as developed by John Mearsheimer.

The theory of offensive realism describes and explains contemporary political phenomenon. Realism here focuses on how the state actors deals with political relations between one another and thus offensive realism is one in whose aim is not

to focus on individuals but the domestic political issues within of a nation and how much power such a state boost of in the international system.

Offensive realism theory therefore emphases on the relation of great powers in the international system and how they behave with each other (Mearsheimer, 2001). He went further to state that though the theory might not predict when war will breakout, it will explain why conflicts arises and why some states are more volatile than others. This to him is the reason why nations seek opportunities to change current balance of power standing by strengthening their relative power at the expense of others through different approach and use of their diplomatic relations, economy or military to their favor.

The basic outline of this theory is captured in the work of Measheimer in his celebrated piece, “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001) where he stated that the theory challenges the relationship of great powers and tries to envisage futuristic issues. He argued that offensive realism is both descriptive and normative in nature which tries to contribute to the explanation of how great powers behave beforehand and how they would behave in future; and simultaneously outlining how a state should in the best potential way survive at the international arena (Anastasia, 2015).

The theory was described by Mearsheimer as stated in Anastasia (2015) with five (5) basic assumptions, which are:

- i. The great powers are the most important actors within the international system, which is seen as an anarchical system.
- ii. All states have offensive military capacity.
- iii. States can never trust other states intentions.
- iv. States primarily goal is survival in the life within the international system.
- v. States are rational actors and their main task is to seek opportunities that can maximize their power

### **Russia- Ukraine Relations**

Ukraine, a country which got her independence from Russia and now led by pro-western elites’ dreams of developing itself away from Russian influence under the democratic doctrine preached by the United States. However, Kremlin sees this to

be dangerous a move capable of clamping down on Russian language, culture and identity in Ukraine. Russia will therefore stop at nothing including undertaking military majors to prevent Ukraine joining NATO as stated by Yuriy Baluyevskiy, the Russian general chief.

Both Russia and Ukraine boast of a common identity as both claim their heritage from Kievan Rus where today's Ukraine capital, Kyiv is said to be the mother of Rus Cities (Kievan, 2000). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the relationship between Russian and Ukraine has been on the decline as noted by Medvedev (2008). This period was a time of tension, ties, and outright hostilities between the successor states of the Soviet Union which both Russia and Ukraine happened to be members. Ukraine wanted to operate a policy that will ensure her sovereignty, independence and balance the cooperation between the European Union, Russia and other powerful nations. However, the relations between Russia and Ukraine became hostile after the Ukrainian revolution in 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea and many such happenings that negates cooperation. These marked the peak of hostilities between the once friendly allies.

The hostility became well known during the regime of President Yushchenko who pushed to secure the NATO MAP for Ukraine which Russia feared that one day its membership would become a reality. Russia quickly kicked against any such move although; Yushchenko has promised that a referendum would be conducted in Ukraine before any move is put to action. In the words of Steven (2009), Russia deemed the NATO member of Ukraine as an existential issue and on February 12, 2008, President Putin standing next to Yushchenko during a joint press conference threaten to target nuclear missiles at Ukraine if it plans to join NATO is not aborted. Again, the plan to join NATO was again threaten when president Putin according to Unian (2008), if Ukraine continues with its plan, then its territorial integrity will come into doubt. This shows the extent to which Russia was willing to go in order to prevent Ukraine joining NATO and protecting its sovereignty.

Due to the continued push by Ukraine to become a member of NATO and the continued resistance from Russia, a Russian military buildup began on the Ukrainian border which escalated the tension between the two countries and strained their



bilateral relations (Crowley, 2021). Ukraine therefore broke all diplomatic relations with Russia and have since barred streets bearing names of Russian figures and removed monuments symbolizing Russia from various locations

### **Involvement of the United States in the Russia- Ukraine Relations**

The Ukrainian crisis is a very complicated conflict as it has marred by propaganda from interested parties: Russia, United States and majority of western powers. The crises today have become a cause of power tussle between World Super powers and most notably between the United State (US) and Russia who both want to establish their control over Ukraine (Anastasia, 2015). Due to the urge of the US to establish its influence and spread its control wide and to the Eastern Europe, it took an interest in Ukraine who has wished to toe the path of liberal democracy. Two factors were identified in the work of Anthony, Chair et al (2014) as the reasons the US considers Ukraine to be an important ally: firstly, the insensitivity of the West to Russian security concern after the cold war and secondly, Russia's attempt to maintain global influence at the highest level.

Expanding on the issue of western insensitivity after the Cold War, Wallender (2014) stated that in the immediate aftermath of the cold war and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United State sought to integrate Russia into the European system hoping to promote democracy, capitalism and human right within the Russian federation. Russia resisted the integration move by the US who then resulted to the policy of NATO expansion. To achieve its expansionist desire in the East, the US subtly began to provide aid to Ukraine which was at the time a close ally of the Russian federation. However, the US got directly and openly involvement in Ukraine when provided over \$18 million in non-lethal security assistance and again provided another \$50million to help in alleviating Ukraine \$2.2billion Russian debt accrued over natural gas (Joe, 2014).

The West continued its expansionist policy through NATO enlargement, EU expansion and democracy promotion which affected the relations between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. In the work of Mearsheimer (2014), the US involvement in November 2013 when Ukraine (President Yanukovich) was persuaded to reject the economic deal it has been negotiating with the European

Union for a \$15billion Russian counter offer; this didn't go down well with the West. The West then played an active part to change the Ukrainian leadership when it struck a deal with the opposition to take over power. With the heat becoming intense, Yanukovich fled to Russia and the new government in Ukraine became pro-western and anti-Russian to the core. The United State was actively involved in all these happenings as was evident through the proclamation of the US ambassador to Ukraine at the time; Geoffrey Pyatt that "Yanukovich's toppling is a day in the history book".

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has also been an active agent in attracting Ukraine into its folds with majority of its actions encouraged by the United State (US). With the continued leaning of Ukraine towards NATO; most especially after 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO has provided Ukraine with several assistance like in 2016, NATO provided Ukraine with a Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) to implement its security and defense sector reforms and in 2020, NATO allowed Ukraine to become one of its Enhanced Opportunity Partners. NATO also provided training to the Ukrainian forces and conduct joint exercises with the Ukrainian armed forces in a multidimensional framework (Anthony, Chair et al 2014).

The aim of the United States (US) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is to have an ally (Ukraine) close enough to be able to monitor and spy on the Russian Federation. Russia which has experienced strikes from Napoleonic France, Nazi Germany and Imperial Germany was not ready to sit and allow the U.S take Ukraine as an ally due to the already existing hostilities between the two world powers and the importance of the Ukrainian state to Russia. Russia therefore stated in clear terms its unhappiness with developments between the United States and Ukraine and confirm the fact that it would not allow any potential threat to be mounted near its home territory. It also considers NATO expansion into Georgia and Ukraine unacceptable as it will have negative consequences on the Russian sovereignty (CRS report, 2021).

With the developing interest of the United State and the continued tension that mount at the Russian border, Russia has severally denied the intention to escalate hostilities

between it and Ukraine but have again warned against any move by Ukraine to join NATO. The United State has however continued to tell and make Ukraine believe that with it membership of NATO, it comes under the shield of NATO and that no nation would seek to attack it as its NATO allies would be there to provide it with military forces and other military aid. As it stands today, no major international organization; the United Nations (UN), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or even the United States (US) has provided Ukraine with Military forces and the chances of such happening is very low (Anthony, Chair et al, 2014)

### **United States' Interest in Ukraine**

In the argument of Mearsheimer (2011) the United States has never really considered the Ukrainian state to be important to it until the Russian Federation made Ukraine to look important. The Ukrainian crises has been blamed majorly on aggressive approach of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin and many have argued that it was out of the desire of the Russian President to resuscitate the soviet empire that he annexed Crimea and eventually went after Ukraine. Again, looking at the outbreak of the crises from another angle, it can be argued that its broke out due to the increasing need of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and most especially the United States strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it with the west. The Russian leaders have however, severally, made it clear that they would not stand by while NATO turns their strategically important neighbors into a western bastion (Mearsheimer, 2014).

What then is the United States' interest in Ukraine has been a question in the international scene. In identifying US interest Ukraine, Steven (2009) stated that the desire to expand NATO eastward in order to protect countries such as Poland and Hungary were major reason behind the United States interest. Furthermore, he also identified the need for Russian power and influence to be contained as another reason why the US picked an interest on Ukraine. Notwithstanding these interests, the US was warned that such move could be a reason for Russia to react by George Kennan (a US diplomat) when its senate approved the first round of NATO expansion. He stated "I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect

their policies”. He further added that the US expansionist move was a big mistake as no one was threatening anyone.

The desires of the US to establish and promote democracy in countries of Eastern Europe, increase economic interdependence and embed them in international institution are reasons why it picked an interest in Ukraine. The speech of the then president of the US, Barrack Obama in 2014 where he repeatedly made reference to western idles in Ukraine and how those ideas would threaten older, traditional world order is an indication of its interest in Ukraine (Mearshimer, 2014). In the same vein, the response of the then Secretary of State John Kerry to the Crimea crises was in same perspective when he stated “you just don’t in the twenty-first century behave in the nineteenth century fashion by invading a country on completely trumped-up pretext”. This shows that the West and specifically the US viewed the action(s) of the East as old fashioned and therefore want to bring about modernization of liberal democracy and other liberal ideas to Ukraine.

In the word of Espinas (2009) as captured in Anastasia (2015) who argued that the US considers European stability and prosperity to be best served by a Ukraine that is democratic, secured in its borders and integrated with Europe and European Atlantic institutions. Russia however sees US involvement as a confrontation on its sphere of influence which it is ready to reject at all cost. The United States notwithstanding sees its interest in Ukraine relations will strengthen bilateral as well as multilateral ties with other countries that as an affluent community which will secure its capacity in the region. It was further argued in the work of that the continued involvement of US in Ukraine will only aid in the upliftment of Ukraine but also prevent the development and rise of a new Russian empire.

## **Conclusion**

Russia and the US have experienced a tumultuous relationship as great powers and witnessed a variety of events that have influenced their behaviors and actions in the Ukraine crisis. Survival is the main goal for great powers since states always tries to maintain their territorial integrity, autonomy and their domestic political order. The

US involvement with NATO's extension, the EU's enlargement and Russia's integration with the EEU, clearly demonstrates that states are rational actors whose primary goal is strategic survive at the international sphere. The Ukrainian crisis broke out due to Ukrainian citizens began to question the Ukraine unitary nation identity as well as its relations the pro-Russian Yanukovich regime, Russia's and the US behaviors and actions have not demonstrated to secure the disturbances between the pro-Western and pro-Russians citizens. It recent times, the Ukraine crisis has developed into a geopolitical power struggle between Russia and the US whereas their incentives have further divided the country. Their behaviors and actions could be explained in their increased efforts to stamp their dominance in the Eastern Europe. Hence, it is seen from a two-sided view that both of them have an economic interest in the region due to the enhancement and securitization of the energy resources as well as the transit routes.

The Russian-Ukrainian crisis and US involvement has therefore always been a fight of supremacy between the United States and Russia with each state trying to establish its influence in Ukraine. The US wished to be allies with Ukraine in order stamp it authority in Eastern Europe and be able to monitor Russian activities and influence in Ukraine preventing the Russian dream from coming into reality. To achieve this, the US laid the foundation for Ukraine to become a member a NATO with the promise of Security and continued economic ties. However, Russia objects this marriage and sees it to be a plot by the US to put it sovereignty into question.

### **Recommendations**

In order to bring an end to the Ukrainian crisis and return peace and development in Eastern Europe, this paper recommends:

- a. The United States which ordinarily would not allow external aggressors near its borders should respect Russia's sovereignty and leave Ukraine alone.
- b. NATO, Russia and the US should allow Ukraine to independently decide whether it wants to join NATO or not and not try to influence its decision.

## **References**

Anastasia, A. (2015). The Ukrainian crisis: A Geopolitical Power Struggle between Russia and the United States (US). Bachelor Thesis in Peace and Development Studies

Anthony, C. et al (2014). Policy brief on the Ukrainian crisis. A disputed past and present. Working Paper 06, CCAS, July.

Congressional Research Services (CRS) (2021). Informing the Legislative Debate since 1914 Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S Policy. R4508

Crowley, M. (2021). "Biden Delivers a Warning to Putin Over Ukraine". The New York Times. Archived from the original on 14 December 2021. Retrieved 14 December 2021.

Dmitri, M. (2014). The Ukrainian Crisis and the Resumption of Great Power Rivalry. Moscow, Carnegie Center 162 Tverskaya.

Grajewski, B. (2022). The Ukrainian Crises: Military Threat and Diplomacy. European parliament Bulletin, October.

Joe, C., Nicole, G. and Julianna, G. (2014). "Ukraine's Unpaid Russian Gas Bills Dwarf U.S. Aid Offer," Bloomberg, April 23, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-04-22/ukraine-s-unpaid-gas-billsdwarf-u-s-aid-offer.html>

Kievan, R. (2000). The Columbia Encyclopedia (6th ed.). Archived from the original on 2000-08-19.

Mearsheimer, J. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault. The liberal Delusions that provoked Putin. The CCCAR, May.

Michal, Y. (2016). The Ukrainian Crisis and Shift in US Foreign Policy. Interdisciplinary political and Cultural Journal, Vol. 18, No. 2, PP. 24-35.

Michael, B. (2017). Challenging US Hegemony: The Ukrainian Crisis and Russian Regional Order. The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review, 4 (4) 76-95.

Stephen, P. and John, F. (2015). The Ukrainian Crisis and European Security. Implications for the United States and U.S Army. Calif. RAND corporation, santa Monica.

Steven, D. (2009). Averting Crisis in Ukraine. Council for Foreign Relations Special Report No. 41, November.

Welt, M. (2021). Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia and U.S policy. Congressional research service; informing the legislative debate. March 18.