

Russia-Ukraine War: A Constructivist Analysis

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the Russia-Ukraine war through the lens of social constructivism. By highlighting the conflicting identities, norms, and interests among actors involved in the conflict, the undertaken study argues that political issue was constructed into a security issue by Russian strategic managers. Based on this core argument this article discusses two key areas: the role of conflicting identities between actors in aggravating the conflict and inter-subjective threat perception of Russian strategic managers. Apropos to this view the paper focuses on Russian strategic culture to elucidate Russia's strategic managers attachment to the imperial past that caused the conflict in the first place. To demonstrate this, a qualitative method is employed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the conflict. The study concludes that fissures between Ukraine and Russia are deep rooted in history and in their collective identities that have transcended into a total war and can only be resolved if all players subscribe to an objective security approach.

Key Words: Constructivism, Russia-Ukraine war, conflicting identities, strategic culture

Introduction

Material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of the shared knowledge in which they are embedded (Wendt, 1992). Therefore, War is a socially constructed phenomenon too. Objective facts are not the only parameters behind a state's rationale to opt for war. Ideas, identities, norms and values all play their role in it. But these roles can be built only through interaction of states, forming inter subjective meanings. These successive interactions then create a security culture--- strategic culture that bridges the gap between policy maker's biases and decisions. Similarly, war in Ukraine is the result of conflicting identities and varying strategic culture of the actors involved.

Strategic culture of Russia depends upon its war-fledged history with Europe, its geo-geographic landscape that gives premium to strategic depth, its imperial past, its elite perceptions and narratives and its proclivity towards militarism. All these factors have contributed to the profound insecurity Moscow feels when European security apparatus changes particularly towards areas which are sensitive for Russia. Similarly, deep-rooted in history, danger of the return of past conflicts are driving Brussels to expand its area of influence based on mutual norms and values. Hence, Russia-Ukraine can best be explain through divergent elements in the strategic cultures of both states.

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These strategic cultures transcend into threat perceptions which alter the orientations of security managers. Securitization theory aptly explains the threat perception approach of states stating that it is the role of political actors who determine which threats are credible. Once threat construction is established, logic of appropriateness drives states to shrug off rational decision models of cost-benefit analysis and opt for value based decisions. In Eastern Europe, Russia's securitization of Ukraine and then expected utility of war have pushed the Kremlin to enter into war. In this article it has been concluded that securitization of Ukraine based on the conflicting strategic cultures of both these actors have resulted in conflagration of this political conflict.

Overview of Constructivism

- Nicholas Onuf described the international system as the 'World of our making', where meanings attached determine the path followed by states. Social construction of reality is the pivotal point of constructivist ideology where inter subjective meanings determine state decision making trajectory.
- Anarchy is what states make of it. It is neither objective as mountains nor subjective as dreams, instead it is an inter subjective phenomenon that rises after interaction between actors. Self-help and power politics are socially constructed under anarchy. (Wendt, 1992)
- Anarchy does not previously exist unless states interact. This first social act creates expectations. Then, with the successive interactions, a pool of knowledge is gathered that eventually determines behavior of state.
- There are two types of relationships between states based on their interactions—relation of amity and enmity. States behave differently with their friends as compared to foes.
- Identities are the basis of interests. They provide a framework for policy makers.
- Institutions transform interests under anarchy, for example, through institutions of sovereignty, evolution of cooperation and through efforts to transform egoistic identities into collective identity, norms shape the interests of the states.
- Securitization theory explains threats are not some objective things. We as a community choose a particular way to deal with certain threats. Hence, political actors can construct security.

The Paradox of Russian and Ukrainian Identity

Since the 9th century, Russia and Ukraine have been linked with each other one way or another, forming a unique identity. Of all the Soviet satellite states, Ukraine has been closer to Russians in culture, traditions, religion and identity to the extent Ukraine was referred to as Little Russia. They have historical roots that

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stretch back to the Kyvian Rus Empire of 9th century---old Slavic land largely consisting of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. Apart from five years of separation from the 1917 communist revolution to the 1922 Ukrainian integration into the USSR, both these countries have been linked closely with each other..

Russia's President Putin wrote a 6000 words article in July, 2021 named "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" where he desecrated new Ukrainian identity and called it the result of Western manipulation. Putin propounded that Russians and Ukrainians are "One People— a Single whole". They constitute the largest minority in Ukraine. Based on the 2001 census, 29% of the Ukrainians speak Russian as their first language, however, the Russian language population is so dense in eastern Ukraine---Donbas region.

But the tragedy of identity is that it changes. New generation of Ukrainians, particularly living in western areas, are oblivious of Russia-Ukraine collective identity, once they both hold sacred. "Making Ukrainians" efforts by Kiev have tried to build separate Ukrainian identity: they presented Language Law in 2019 to lower down the influence of the Russian language, voting behavior of Eastern and Western Ukrainians that was once contradictory to each other have become mild and they have also tried to change religious institution through the crackdown on Orthodox Church that Putin vigorously criticized. These antithetical trajectories have infused resentment between Russia and Ukraine that has eventually resulted in conflagration. More importantly, what and how Russian and Europeans think about each other in security terms can be understood through the elements within their strategic culture.

Strategic Culture:

Strategic cultures can be utilized as a yardstick to assess that how ideas, values and interests determine state policies. How the elite of a state thinks about the security of the state. Jack L. Snyder in his seminal work "Strategic culture" defined it "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behavior that members of national security have acquired through instruction and imitation and share with each other"(Snyder, 1994).Strategic culture therefore holds constructivists' view by delving into the question: How states first determine friend or foe. Hence, to understand why Moscow waged a war against its eastern neighbor, understanding the strategic culture of Russia is of prime significance.

Strategic culture of Russia:

There are five factors that determine the strategic culture of Russia: long history of war with Europe, geographic landscape that makes strategic depth inevitable for survival, its glorious imperial past, elite narrative of western hostility towards Russia and militarism. So, the inter subjective meaning that Russian leaders attach are constructed through Russia and Europe longstanding historical experiences.

Long history of war:

Europe has been the center of geo-political gravity for Russian foreign and security policy. Though, Russia borders with multiple regions---in south to Central Asian states, in west to Europe, in north to Antarctic regions, none is more significant for Russia than Europe, owing to the religious, cultural and social

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contiguity. In fact, Russia's foreign policy as a modern state is confined to Europe. Whether it is the Great Game of the 19th century between Russia and Britain or the fight for communist ideology in the 20th century, Europe remains the crucial region for Russian foreign policy. Moreover, Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth fighting a war with Russian empire in 1605-18, Napoleon invading Russia in the start of the 19th century and Hitler's Germany penetrating in the 20th century has an indelible impact on the minds of Russian policy makers. More so, in the Crimean war 1853-56, the alliance of Britain, Austria and the Ottoman Empire fought against Russia, sending the signal of European duplicity and betrayal. In recent history, twice Russia had to relinquish its hold over the vast empire, in 1918 when after internal chaos, Ukraine and other areas became independent, and in 1991 with the dis-integration of the USSR happened. In the former case, Russia was successful in merging those separated regions. But in the case of USSR disintegration, acquiring the old status of major world power that Moscow has not stopped dreaming.

Volatile Geography

There has been fusion of history and geography for Russia. It lacks physical features for defensive barriers as has been the case with the USA and Great Britain. For protection and security, Russia has always pursued a policy of territorial expansion--- in the west towards Europe, in the East towards Siberia and in the South towards Caucasian and Central Asian states. But major threat has come from European flat land. Therefore, European plains stretching from Poland are of huge significance for the security of Russia. All these factors have made Strategic Depth a critical element for the Kremlin.

Imperial Past

Putin denoted USSR disintegration as the Greatest Tragedy of the 20th century. Russia still relishes its achievements of WW2 calling it the Great Patriotic War defeating Nazi Germany. Not just that, its military sophistication, nuclear capabilities and technological development had bestowed Russia's inherent right of sphere of influence. This glorious past has an indelible impact on the minds of the Kremlin elite. Engraved in their memory, the past is defining their future premonitions. Russia's once satellite states choosing policy repugnant to the former's desires have challenged the Kremlin. That's why Putin always uses an iron fist to counter that threat even if it is not an existential threat to Russia's sovereignty. When the West pondered over granting NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia in 2007, based on preconceived notions, Putin, in his famous speech, in Munich security conference, denounced the West for antagonistic move and saw the inclusion of Ukraine in NATO a direct threat to Russia's interests. Terming the constant encroachment of NATO as extremely 'provocative', Putin asked: 'what happened to assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of Warsaw Pact'. From a Constructivist point of view, under anarchy, identity formation is linked with the security of self.

In Russian political circles, words like *Derzhavnost*—for great power status, and *Gosudarstvnoy*—for centralization of state hold huge significance in depicting efforts on the part of the Russian elite to capture great power status. Hence, the Russian identity of the spectacular past has been the reason behind Putin's decisions. Putin's use of crony capitalism to strengthen Russia's influence in

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Europe, particularly deploying his two main weapons---Oil and Natural Gas, to the military buildup is an indicator of his efforts to achieve the past. Russia also manipulates its neighbors to accord to its demands. Moments before signing a trade deal with the EU, Victor Yanukovich, by nowhere, signed a deal with Russia in 2014, outraging people living in western Ukraine, which eventually led to the Maidan uprising in Kiev.

Russian Elite's narrative of Western Hostility

Having a centralized system, Russian policy makers consist of a small elite, majority of them are children of the Soviet Union's 'Great Generation' who fought a 'Great Patriotic war' against Nazi Germany. There has been a widespread claim that after the 1990s, 'European West and USA' have left no stone unturned to weaken Russia and to encircle it with hostile neighbors through color Revolutions. Putin, many a times, in his speeches mentioned the West's interference in neighboring countries. From deployment of missile defense systems in Russian peripheral countries to the efforts of democratization in Eastern European countries, Moscow blames the west for its provocative moves. Particularly, under Putin, former members of Russian and Soviet security forces---'Silivoki', have regained their position. This KGBization of Russian security managers has intensified the conflict.

Militarization

Another factor that has determined Russia's strategic culture is militarization. There has been inherent belief among Kremlin policy makers that Russia can solve any conflict through use of force. Otherwise, how come the economic agreement between Ukraine and EU would become a threat for Russia when in a response Russia annexed Crimea in 2014? Nor was the Russo-Georgian war the result of any existential threat. Both these incidents caught the world by surprise since there was hardly a provocation equal to the threat to its survival. These decisions brought bounded rationality at play. Putin's militarization efforts are equal to none with sophisticated missiles---cruise and ballistic to S-400 defense system. This militarization campaign also results when offense-defense balance tilts in the favor of offense. Since last decade Russia has participated in quite a few foreign civil wars---Syria etc. however, Russia has miss-calculated Ukraine war considering NATO and US would not come to rescue it as happened in Syria.

Russian military goals are constructed over zero-sum game and these are three pronged: favoring conflict beyond borders, notion of sphere of influence and concern for Rusiky-Russian diaspora. Therefore, Moscow's inherent belief in the military to protect its political gains have formed an identity which is at play in Russian aggression around the world.

European strategic Culture

If Russia remains wary of European strategic movements then the EU and USA think and act on same lines. Disintegration of the USSR left no space for the continuance of the NATO---security alliance that was inherently formed to counter and contain the USSR. But Europe remained persistent in not just continuing it but also expanding it towards East. However, NATO tried to incorporate value based

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identity but the sole reason for Europe's intransigence over relinquishing the trans-Atlantic security alliance was based over the fear of return of the past conflicts.

This value based strategic culture strived to democratize Eastern European countries which was seen as a threat by Moscow. Spread of liberal values were countered by Putin state centralization and forceful subjugation of its allies to not enter into any bilateral and multilateral agreement.

Russian Threat Perception

Russian threat perception is rooted in its strategic culture. It depends on state preference that it accords to certain threats as Elizabeth Kier termed it 'screening out some part of the reality and magnifying others'. When Ronald Reagan proclaimed that efforts are being made 'to free people who are resisting attempted subjugation' Moscow retaliated. Even after three decades when the Kremlin is comparatively weaker than what it was in the cold war, Russian threat perception formula have not changed. Any efforts of democratization, expansion of the trans-Atlantic community are seen by Moscow as a threat to its security.

For that, Moscow has framed a buffer zone comprising eastern European states, therefore, Western Expansion, this time through NATO and EU, poses a direct threat to Russia's ever-existing, preconceived existential threat. Putin asked that question in his Munich speech in 2007: 'against whom is this expansion intended'. How peaceful European slogans of collective security based on norms, values and mutual cooperation seem, Kremlin is averse to those. This threat perception transcends into Putin use of securitization theory to securitize Ukraine.

Securitization Theory and Russia-Ukraine conflict

"It is by labeling something a security issue that it becomes one" (Waeber 2014, 13). According to this theory, issues that are fundamentally political are considered and analyzed from a security perspective. Issues are being prioritized and constructed through "speech acts" where actors try to persuade the audience that the issue is a threat to the referent object. According to Copenhagen School scholars, securitization is an extreme version of politicization in which one political actor pulls an issue from the political realm to the security realm (Braysal, 2020).

Successful securitization of any issue depends on three steps. These are (1) identification of existential threat, (2) emergency actions and (3) effect on inter-unit relations by breaking free of rules (Buzan et al 1998: 6). Therefore, Securitization of Ukraine by Russia consists of two factors: NATO expansion, and threat to the lives of Russian Compatriots living in European countries.

In the first step, Russia identified NATO expansion as an existential threat through speech acts of the Kremlin elite. Putin claimed that Russia was promised that this alliance would not move eastward. However, it did expand, with Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary joining it in 1999, and the Baltic States (Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia), Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria becoming the member of this alliance in 2004. Putin's article 'on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians' negated Ukrainian separate identity and vigorously criticized west for its propaganda. NATO's offer of intensified dialogue to Georgia and Ukraine in

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April 2006 and March 2005 respectively was perceived as a direct threat to Russian interests. Apart from NATO expansion, protection of Russian compatriots living in neighboring territories---Silivoki, became another reason behind Putin securitization of Ukraine. Putin claimed that his interference in Eastern Ukraine was akin to stopping a 'genocide'. He linked his interference to the term that "everything that we are doing today, including the special military operation (in Ukraine), is an attempt to stop this war. That's the sense of our operation, and to protect our peoples who live there, in these territories".

In step two, emergency actions were taken by Russia to counter those threats including the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 when South Ossetia and Abkhazia were separated from Georgia. In 2014, when Ukraine was at the cusp of signing an economic deal with EU, firstly Russia pressurized Viktor Yanukovich to pull out of this deal by threatening it with sanctions and then entered its forces into Crimea---eventually annexing it and started a war in Donbass region of Eastern Ukraine by giving aid to the separatist who value Russian identity as well. Expansion of NATO and protection of Russian compatriots both were the reasons behind Moscow actions.

However, it cannot be negated that EU and NATO's also played a role in securitization of Ukraine where NATO expanded heedlessly towards the eastern border, awakening their concerns and grievances. For a state that has spent majority of recent history protecting buffer zones, challenge by European community antagonized Moscow's elite.

Logic of Appropriateness and Russian war utility

Russia's securitization of Ukraine based on its strategic culture poses a pertinent question: Was Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was rational? Has Russia succeeded in obtaining its objectives in Ukraine? This question can be answered through the Logic of appropriateness that prescribes that in the face of threat, states leave cost-benefit analysis and opt for what social norms deem fit, even resorting to extreme measures.

Logic of appropriateness elucidates Putin's decision of desecrating sovereignty of its western neighbor but the cost of the war is over weighing benefits that Russia visualized. Putin miscalculated the response of the NATO led alliance. After a year of war, it has reached a stalemate situation where the likelihood of either side standing on the winning side has become bleak. Death toll of Russian military personnel is increasing with above 5000 deaths every month.

All this argument leads to a pertinent question: whether the Ukrainian threat was existential to the Russians? This question is answered differently by both actors involved. But the logic of appropriateness that has derived from Putin's decision does not accord with calamities and casualties this way has accrued.

Analysis Viewpoint:

Russian-Ukraine war has been the result of divergent strategic cultures of actors involved. These strategic cultures emanate from bitter historical experiences that

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stretch to centuries. These historical experiences have constructed the identities upon which both factions are treating each other. Securitization of Ukraine by both parties---Russia and NATO led European states, have been the root cause of this war. Putin through his speech acts denounced Ukrainian existence as a separate country and securitized it. Whereas, west always remain reluctant whether to include Ukraine in European led collective security alliance or not. Hence, this war is not so sudden occurrence, Russia always flared up the eastern Ukrainians, and the only difference is that now Kremlin has a pool of resources that it can employ with strong economy backing it.

Present identity of Ukraine does not coincide with Putin claims as majority of the population hardly feels affiliated with Russian state. With the passage of time, Ukrainians has formed separate identity, for this has caused shear resistance to Kremlin that Russia under-estimated or miscalculated. Putin's decision to wage a war was also based on bounded rationality due to lack of information that was provided to Putin regarding unity of Ukraine and collective response of West.

The way forward

- When Rationalist theories criticize constructivism of its ability to predict, their concerns are valid to a certain extent. The prediction power of this theory is limited because inter-subjectivity cannot be foretold. However, significance to the things this theory accords can help states manufacture healthy relationships. For instance, identities, norms, values are of prime importance in state's decision making; therefore, states must strive to attain those on mutual grounds.
- For constructivists, inter-subjectivity is the key that only happens through interaction. To break the ice, Russia and Ukraine must meet each other to discuss issues of bilateral significance. Memory that is filled with distrust requires Confidence Building Measures (CBMs).
- Collective norms building should be given preference and that can only happen through a single, collective platform. Listening to each other grievances and building a trust based on prisoner dilemma.

Conclusion

Conflicting identities and diverging strategic cultures of Russia and North Atlantic security alliance have resulted in Russia-Ukraine war. However, these strategic cultures are built on bitter historical experiences. Russian policy makers' proclivity to think and act on the lines of imperial past, militarism and narrative process that sees west its enemy ready to make Russia weak have aggravated this conflict. Realists while defining war attach prime importance to security dilemma which results due to enduring insecurity created in the international anarchic system, but vital questions remain unanswered: How this security dilemma was created in the first place. This can only be answered by examining the role of conflicting identities, strategic culture of that state. How the security elite perceives that threat determines the future of any conflict. In the Ukrainian case, the fusion of history and geography, elite perception and the pride of imperial past is driving Russia to interfere into the foreign territory.

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By adopting a constructivist perspective, we can gain a deeper understanding of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and move towards a more nuanced and effective approach to resolving it. It is time for us to embrace this approach and to see the world as it truly is – a socially constructed reality shaped by our interactions and beliefs

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