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International Relations Theory and the Ukrainian War

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Abstract: Drawing on my qualitative and quantitative research I show that the motives for war have changed in the course of the last four centuries, and that the causes of war and the responses of others to the use of force are shaped by society. Leaders who start wars rarely behave with the substantive and instrumental rationality assumed by realist and rationalist approaches. For this reason, historically they lose more than half wars than they start. After 1945, the frequency of failure rises to over 80 percent. Rationalists allow for miscalculation but attribute it to lack of information. In most wars, information was available beforehand that indicated, or certainly suggested, that the venture would not succeed militarily or fail to achieve its political goals. The war in Ukraine is a case in point.

Keywords: war, rationality, realism, miscalculation, opportunity versus need driven challenges, Ukraine

Modernity is a social construct, but a very useful one. Today's social world is very different in important ways for that of earlier centuries. Among the most important theorized differences are the deepening of the inner self; a nearly universal quest for identity and self-expression; the emergence of equality as the most valued principle of justice; the breakdown of class barriers, and with it, the greater freedom of individuals from social constraints; a greater emphasis on wealth, and the claiming of status by its display (Seigel 2005; Lebow 2012). International relations theories are to varying degrees anchored in this new social reality. The liberal, Marxist, and constructivist paradigms are rooted in modernity, but in different understandings of it. Realism, by contrast, relies on pre-modern and modern understandings of social relations, and makes little to no effort to distinguish between them. Modern framings of realism generally posit security as the goal of states, treat actors for the most part as substantively and instrumentally

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rational, and at the same time deny the possibility of progress. As did the ancients, they see order and decline as a repetitive cycle from which there is no escape. I argue that such an approach tells us next to nothing about the institution of war or about the causes of individual wars.

My argument is conceptual and empirical. I begin with a brief account of the substantive and epistemological assumptions of the several paradigms that address the problem of war. I focus on realism, where I make a sharp distinction between classical and modern formulations realism, neorealism being among the latter. The latter describes a variety of research programs that share in common more than they generally acknowledge. Modern realists of all kinds tend to treat war as an ahistorical process in the sense that they do not situate it in society but treat it as an independent institution. They do the same, of course, with the balance of power. Some realists are uninterested in state-level variation (Waltz 1979). Others recognize some actors as more aggressive and war-like than others but offer no explanations to account for these differences (Morgenthau 1948). To the extent that realists historicize war, it is with regard to economy and technology. I draw on my qualitative and quantitative research to show that the motives for war have changed in the course of the last four centuries, and that the causes of war and the responses of others to the use of force are shaped by society. The causes, frequency, and outcomes of wars cannot be studied in a social void.

I make a further point that is particularly relevant to the war in Ukraine. Leaders who start wars rarely behave with the substantive and instrumental rationality assumed by realist and rationalist approaches. For this reason, historically they lose more than half wars than they start. After 1945, the frequency of failure rises to over 80 percent (Lebow and Valentino 2009). Rationalists allow for miscalculation but attribute it to lack of information. In most wars, information was available beforehand that indicated, or certainly suggested, that the venture would not succeed militarily or fail to achieve its political goals.

What accounts for such irrationality? I have argued elsewhere (Jervis, Lebow, and Stein 1984; Lebow and Stein 1994; Lebow 2003) that war-threatening challenges of other states— and here, I extend the claim to war initiation—is often due a combination of domestic and strategic problems that leaders believe can only be overcome by successful brinkmanship or war. Not all initiators of crises and wars are driven by need. Some harbour aggressive designs, and for diverse political and psychological reasons seek to expand their territory at the expense of other political units. It is important distinguish between these different motives because they warrant somewhat different kinds of responses.

War has always been a legitimate form of state activity. Modernity, and social values associated with it, have nevertheless brought about significant shifts in that kinds of uses of force that are considered legitimate. These changes, I contend, are

not linear in the sense of consistently seeking to limit or do away with war. They initially sought to legitimate certain kinds of wars and delegitimize others. The frequency of war has dropped in the modern era, and more so after 1945 (Gleditsch 2004; Holsti 1991). In the post-war era the process has been more linear, with norms or laws coming into place that all but restrict the use of force to self-defence, aid of others who are attacked, or humanitarian intervention (Zacher 2001). Today, the legitimate use of the force must be seen as defensive or require authorization by appropriate regional or international organizations. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is based on earlier understanding of what constituted a legitimate use of force: the building or rebuilding of empire. It is no longer acceptable to most of global society. The outcome of the war has important consequences for the future of these laws and norms and for the relative appeal of different research programs in IR.

1 Human Drives

In *Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Lebow 2008) I follow the ancient Greeks in positing appetite, spirit (*thumos*), and reason as fundamental human drives. Each has distinct goals, generates different logics of cooperation, conflict and risk-taking, is associated with different principles of justice or combinations of them, and gives rise to different kinds of hierarchies.

Appetite is the drive with which we are most familiar. There are many appetites, including those for food, drink, shelter, and sex, but contemporary economists and political scientists focus on wealth. They assume it is the most important appetite, and the facilitator of all others. The 'Economic Man' so beloved by economists is thought to devote 'himself' to maximize wealth.

Early efforts at wealth accumulation often involved violence, as it was easier to take others' possessions than to produce one's own. Until recent times, piracy was an honoured profession, and slavery, often the result of raiding expeditions, was an acceptable means of generating wealth through the labour of others. Riches acquired through conquest became an important goal of empires. The norm against territorial conquest only developed in the twentieth century (Zacher 2001). Earlier trading economies (e.g., the Carthaginians, Portuguese, French, and British) viewed wealth as a zero-sum game and sought to exclude competitors from access to raw materials and markets they controlled. Recognition dawned only slowly that generating surplus through production and trade made societies and their rulers richer than they could through conquest, that production and trade benefited from peace and that affluence was as much the result of cooperation as it was of conflict. It was not until the late eighteenth century that economists like

Adam Smith (1779/1976) began to understand that the free exchange of capital, goods, people, and ideas is in the long-term common interest of all trading states.

Spirit (thumos) finds expression in the universal human desire for self-esteem. This sense of self-worth that makes people feel good about themselves, happier about life, and more confident in their ability to confront its challenges. Self-esteem is generally achieved by excelling in activities valued by one's peers or society and gaining respect from those whose opinions matter. By winning the approbation of such people we feel good about ourselves. Self-esteem requires some sense of independent self, but also recognition of the central importance of society because it is impossible to achieve in the absence of commonly shared values and accepted procedures for demonstrating excellence. Self-esteem is closely connected with status. In contrast to appetite, where status is proclaimed through conspicuous consumption, spirit-based status must be conferred on actors by others in response to their achievements. In this connection, ancient Greeks distinguished between honour and standing. The former is standing achieved through rules-based competition, and the latter by any means available. Regional and international societies become more violent when rules are violated and ultimately break down, as happened in the years before both World Wars.

People can satisfy some appetites by instinct. They must be taught how to express and satisfy the spirit through pathways stipulated as appropriate by their society. Societies have strong incentives to nurture and channel the spirit. It encourages individual self-control and sacrifice from which the community as a whole benefits. In warrior societies, the spirit finds expression in bravery and selflessness. All societies must restrain, or deflect outwards, the competition engendered by the spirit and the anger that arises when it is challenged or frustrated. As noted, states are not people. They lack psyches and have no innate drives or character. They are what people make of them. In the modern era, people routinely project their needs for self-esteem on collective enterprises. They build self-esteem through the accomplishments of groups, sports teams, and above all, nations and religions, with which they affiliate. Arguably, the most important function of nationalism in the modern world is to provide vicarious satisfaction to the spirit. As their states rise and fall in power, status, and competitions of all kinds, people feel better or worse about themselves. States that encourage this association risk becoming prisoners of the passions they have helped arouse, as is arguably the case in China (Gries 2005; Wong 2020).

Plato (1996, Book 4) describes appetite and spirit as two distinct drives. He shows how they come into conflict, as when someone is thirsty but drinking in the circumstance would be socially inappropriate and result in a loss of standing. In Plato's Athens, as in many societies, wealth was a prerequisite for honour (Aristotle 1984b, 1286b922). In international relations until recently honour was

restricted to great powers, and a state had to be rich to aspire to this status. In the modern world, it has become more difficult to separate wealth and standing. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755/1964, 147–60, 174–5) and Adam Smith (1759/2002, I.iii.2.1) both commented on the extent to which wealth was becoming instrumental good because it was the principal means, or at least prerequisite, of gaining standing. Joseph Schumpeter (1983, 82) believed that most entrepreneurs were motivated less by making money than by “the dream to found a private kingdom” in the form of an eponymous company that carries one’s name and fame across the generations.

Reason for Plato and Aristotle was an independent drive. It sought to understand what led to a happy life and to constrain and then educate appetite and spirit alike to cooperate with it toward this end. Reason-based worlds could not be found in practice so ancient and modern philosophers have had to imagine them. For Plato, it is Kallipolis of the *Republic* or Magnesia of the *Laws*. For Aristotle (1984a, Book 8), it is *homonoia*, a community whose members agreed about the nature of the good life and how it could be achieved. For Augustine of Hippo (426/1950), it is a culture in which human beings use their reason to control, even overcome, their passions, and act in accord with God’s design. For Marx, it is a society in which people contribute to the best of their abilities and receive what they need in return. For Rawls (1999), it is a utopia that conforms to the principles of distributive justice.

Most of these thinkers acknowledge that disagreements would still exist in reason-informed worlds. They nevertheless believe they would not threaten the peace because they would not involve fundamental issues of justice and could be adjudicated in an environment characterized by mutual respect and trust. Plato and Aristotle understand their fictional worlds as ideals toward which we must aspire, individually and collectively, but which we are unlikely ever to achieve. Their worlds are intended to serve as templates that we can use to measure how existing worlds live up to our principles. As Plato understood, even imperfect knowledge of a form motivates citizens and cities to work toward its actualization.

Fear is an emotion not an innate human drive. It arises when reason loses control of spirit and appetite. Spirit and appetite-based worlds are inherently unstable. They are intensely competitive, which encourages actors to get ahead by violating the rules by which honour or wealth is attained. When enough actors do this, those who continue to obey the rules are likely to be seriously handicapped. This provides a strong incentive for all but the most committed actors to defect from the rules. This dilemma is most acute in spirit-based worlds because of the relational nature of honour and standing, which makes it a zero-sum game unless there are multiple hierarchies of honour and standing. Actors nevertheless often frame the acquisition of wealth as a winner-take-all competition and behave

competitively even when cooperation would be mutually beneficial. Here too, lack of self-restraint encourages others to follow suit in their pursuit of wealth. Disregard for rules accordingly takes two forms: non-performance of duties—including self-restraint—by high status actors, and disregard of these status and associated privileges by actors of lesser standing. The two forms of non-compliance are likely to be self-reinforcing and have the effect of weakening hierarchies and order the orders they instantiate.

Aristotle (1984c, 1382a21-35) defines fear “as a pain or disturbance due to imagining some destructive or painful evil in the future.” It is caused “by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain.” It is the opposite of confidence and is associated with danger, which is the approach of something terrible. It is aroused by the expectation, rather than the reality, of such an event and encourages a deliberative response. It is often provoked by another actor’s abuse of its power and is threatening to the social order, not just to individuals.

Following Aristotle, I argue that the principal cause of the breakdown of orders is the unrestricted pursuit by actors—individuals, political factions or states—of their parochial goals. This leads other actors to fear for their ability to satisfy their spirit and or appetites, and perhaps for their survival. Fearful actors are likely to consider and implement a range of precautions which can run the gamut from bolting their doors at night to acquiring allies and more and better arms. Escalation of this kind is invariably paralleled by shifts in threat assessment. Images rich in nuance and detail give way to simpler and more superficial stereotypes of adversaries or, worse still, of enemies. This shift, and the corresponding decline in cognitive complexity, undermines any residual trust and encourages worst-case analyses of their motives, behaviour, and future initiatives. Mutually reinforcing changes in behaviour and framing can start gradually but at some point accelerate and bring about a phase transition into a fear-based world.

Fear triggers a desire for security which can be satisfied in many ways. In interstate relations, it is usually through the direct acquisition of military power (and the economic well-being that makes this power) or its indirect acquisition through alliances. It is also a catalyst, as it is at the domestic level, for institutional arrangements that provide security by limiting their capabilities and independence of actors who might do one harm. Table 1 below compares *fear* to *appetite*, *spirit*, and *reason*.

Table 1 below offers a typology of motives, goals, and instruments towards their end, or reduction in the case of fear. In international relations all these motives are generally in play; leaders are motivated by wealth, standing, well-being, and security for themselves or their states. Depending on the nature of the political system, they are also under pressure by their citizens to achieve these

Table 1: Motives, goals and means.

Motive	Goal	Instrument
Appetite	Pleasure	Wealth
Spirit	Esteem	Honor/Standing
Reason	Happiness	Self-restraint
Fear	Security	Power

ends, although there may be no consensus about the most effective means of doing so. The relative strength and importance vary across actors, situations, cultures, and epochs (Lebow 2008). As we see below, modern international relations theories build on single motives, with appetite and fear by far the most common.

2 IR Theory and Modernity

I turned to the Greeks because of their richer understanding of the human mind. Modern thinkers, by contrast, offer a stripped-down version of the psyche. In the course of the Enlightenment, Aristotelian *telos*—the end for which something as created—was rejected, appetite was upgraded, and *thumos* was correspondingly downgraded, if not altogether purged from the philosophical and psychological lexicon. *Thumos* had been valued by the aristocracy, who used it since ancient times to justify its claim to power and privilege. Moderns condemned it seen as the principal cause of war. Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* (1714/1957) and Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776/1976) convinced many readers that the individual search for private wealth was the engine of prosperity and well-being. David Hume (1739/1994) argued that it also encouraged the virtues essential for a peaceful and well-regulated domestic order.

The rejection of *telos* required a corresponding reconceptualization of reason. Reason was reduced to a mere instrumentality, ‘the slave of the passions’ in the words of David Hume (1739/1978, II.iii.3 (416)). Max Weber (1926/2000) later coined the term ‘instrumental reason’ to describe this transformation and explore some of its consequences. Freud incorporated it in his model of the mind; the ego embodies reason and mediates between the impulses of the Id and the external environment. Rational choice employs a similar understanding of reason; it assumes that actors rank order their preferences and engage in the kind of strategic behavior best calculated to obtain them. The modern reframing of reason as instrumentality is indicative of the shift in focus away from the ends we should seek to the means of best satisfying our appetites.

This shift in thinking about human beings is reflected in international relations theory. Liberalism and Marxism are the paradigm of politics and international relations based on the drive of appetite, reason conceived of only instrumentally, and fully autonomous actors. Theories and propositions rooted liberalism, including those associated with the Democratic Peace research program, do a comprehensive job of laying out the assumptions of a world in which interest is defined in terms of wealth and the behaviour to which it gives rise. Liberals assert—as a matter of ideology—that an international society of capitalist democracies would be war-free and is the only efficient response to the post-industrial world. Marxism also foregrounds wealth but offers a more negative take on it. In contrast to liberals, who describe untrammelled appetite and instrumental reason as the basis for a harmonious world, Marxists see them as the source of unrelieved class conflict, but many expect that that will culminate in socialism. Appetite and instrumental reason are foundational to both paradigms but developed in a diametrically opposed direction. For liberals, greed is a source of cooperation and peace, and for Marxists, the principal cause of war.

Realism is premised on fear-based worlds being the default. The anarchic nature of the international environment is said to make countries and their leaders fearful for their survival. This fear prompts arms build-ups, alliances, and balancing against perceived aggressors. John Herz (1950) theorized that these actions can make fears for security self-fulfilling in the absence of any aggressor because every state aims for a military advantage, and this quest can convince others of its malign intentions. In his view, this ‘security dilemma,’ and not anarchy, is what makes international relations so fear-generating war-prone. Realism has given rise to numerous variants and competing theories, but almost all rest of these assumptions (Jervis 1978; Waltz 1979).

Classical realism is the exception. This tradition originates with Thucydides and finds modern expression in the writings of Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Ned Lebow (2003, 2008). Classical realists do not attribute fear-dominated worlds to anarchy, in the sense of international politics being different by reason of its lack of government. They describe domestic and international politics as taking place within societies where behaviour is more governed by norms and habits than it is by empirical laws. When society breaks down because of the lack of constraint by powerful actors, it becomes anarchical. The logic of anarchy in modern realism assumes that those who are weak are the most threatened in fear-based world. They are also the most likely to balance or bandwagon. The breakdown of *nomos* thesis in classical realism suggests that it is elite actors who set escalatory processes in motion, and because they are overconfident, not fearful. The history of the last two centuries provides numerous examples of this

phenomenon at the domestic and international levels. Multiple failed bids for hegemony by Spain, France, Germany are cases in point.

In traditional spirit-based worlds—those dominated by warrior elites—wars tend to be frequent but limited in their ends and means. Many of these societies (e.g., Greeks, Aztecs, Maoris) waged wars in conformity with a strict set of rules. In fear-based worlds wars may be less frequent but are more unrestrained in their ends and means and correspondingly more costly. They are also more difficult to prevent by deterrence and alliances, the stock-and-trade realist tools of conflict management. One of the most revealing aspects of Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is the absolute failure of all alliances and all forms of deterrence intended to prevent war. They almost invariably provoked the behaviour they were intended to prevent (Lebow 2013; Thucydides 1996). General and immediate deterrence have failed more often than they succeeded in modern times for the same reasons; they tend to confirm worst-case fears of their targets, convincing them of the need to demonstrate more, not less, resolve, in the equally false expectation that it would deter their adversaries from further aggressive initiatives (Lebow 1981, chaps. 4–6; Chang 1990; Chen 2001; Hopf 1994). When target actors are focused on the own problems or goals, and commit to challenges or the use of force, deterrence is likely to fail. This is most apparent when challenges are need-based, but sometimes also apparent when they are purely aggressive and opportunistic. In both situations, would-be initiators of crises or wars are motivated to deny, distort, explain away or discredit obvious signs of adversarial resolve (Lebow 1983, chaps. 4–6; Jervis, Lebow, and Stein 1984, chaps. 3 and 5; Lebow and Stein 1994, chap. 3). For these reasons deterrence is least likely to succeed in those circumstances where modern realists and strategic analysis consider it most needed and appropriate.

Fear-driven worlds are the opposite of honour and interest worlds in that they are like lobster traps: easy to enter and difficult to leave. Once fear is aroused it is hard to assuage. Worst-case analysis, endemic to fear-based worlds, encourages actors to see threat in even the most benign and well-meaning gestures. This creates a snowball effect, making fears of such worlds self-fulfilling. Actors who contemplate steps toward trust and accommodation rightfully worry that others will misunderstand their intent or exploit their concessions. Pure fear-based worlds are few and far between, but most political units for most of their history have had to worry to some degree about their security. For this reason, realists see fear-driven worlds as the condition to which human societies inevitably return. History gives ample cause for pessimism—but also for optimism. Competition for colonies in the late nineteenth century, sought primarily for reasons of standing, got out of hand, led to increasingly unrestrained competition in the Balkans and

pushed the European powers toward World War I. Beggar-thy-neighbour policies during the Great Depression reveal how quickly a partially liberal trading world can be destroyed (Kindleberger 1973). Europe's phenomenal economic and political recovery after World War II, based in large part on the consolidation of democracy in Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, has transformed that continent in ways that would have been dismissed out of hand as idle dreams if offered as a prediction as late as the early 1950s.

Classical realism (Lebow 2003) puts as much emphasis on spirit as a motive as fear. It recognizes that it is powerful states, not weak ones, who most often feel humiliated. They are much more likely than weak ones to go to war to gain status or revenge. My explanation for this phenomenon draws on Plato (Plato 1996, 440c-441c) and Aristotle's understanding of anger (Aristotle 1984c, 387a31-33, 1378b10-11, 138,024-29). It is provoked by a an *oligōria*, which can be translated as a slight, lessening or belittlement. Such a slight can issue from an equal but provokes even more anger when it comes from an actor who lacks the standing to challenge or insult us—consider the American response to the Arab terrorists who took down the twin towers of the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon. Anger is a luxury that can only be felt by those in a position to seek revenge.

Modern realists maintain that survival is the overriding goal of all states, just as domestic politics explanations assert that it is for leaders (Waltz 1979, 92; Mearsheimer 2001, 46). This is not true of honor societies, where honor has a higher value. Achilles spurned a long life in favor of an honorable death that brings fame. For Homer and the Greeks fame allows people to transcend their mortality. Great deeds carry one's name and reputation across the generations where they continue to receive respect and influence other actors. In the real world, not just in Greek and medieval fiction, warriors, leaders and sometimes, entire peoples, have opted for honor over survival. We encounter this phenomenon in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and Japan. In *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, I document how such considerations were important for leaders and peoples from post-Westphalian Europe to the post-Cold War world. Perhaps the most compelling case is the origins of World War I, where defense of honour and the status that went with it, was the principal motive that prompted Austrian and Russian leaders to act in ways they knew threatened the survival of their respective empires (Lebow 2003, chapt. 7).

To summarize, honour-based societies experience conflict about who is 'recognized' and allowed to compete for standing; the rules governing agon or competition, the nature of the deeds that confer standing and the actors who assign honour, determine status, and adjudicate competing claims. Tracking the relative intensity of conflict over these issues and the nature of the changes or accommodations to which they lead provide insight into the extent to which

honour and standing remain primary values in a society and its ability to respond to internal and external challenges.

Real worlds are mixed in that all four motives are usually to some degree present. Real worlds are also lumpy in that the mix of motives differs from actor to actor and often within their elites. Multiple motives generally mix rather than blend, giving rise to a range of behaviours that appear inconsistent, even contradictory. It is nevertheless possible to identify primary motives in many instances and establish through qualitative and quantitative analysis their relative importance for war.

3 Empirical Evidence

In *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (2008), I developed a paradigm of politics and international relations based on the spirit. I spelled out its different logic from realism, liberalism, and Marxism, with regard to cooperation, conflict, and risk taking. I documented its relevance to foreign policy in case studies ranging from ancient Greece to the present century. The Greek, Macedonian, Roman, and Carolingian cases might be considered the easy ones because *thumos* and the quest for honour is widely understood as central to these cultures. This is thought less true in modern era, where appetite is believed to have replaced spirit as the dominant human motive. Nineteenth and twentieth century wars thus constitute the ‘hard cases’ for my theory. I nevertheless believe that *I demonstrated the primacy of the spirit* for the initiators of the two World Wars and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq.

I subsequently put together a data set to allow quantitative evaluation of my theory (Lebow 2010, chapt. 3). It included all wars since 1648—the conventional starting data of the modern era in international relations—that involved at least one or more great or rising powers. I defined as precisely as possible what constituted a great or rising power, and also a declining great power. For coding these categories I relied on standard historical treatments and consultations with prominent historians. I did the same when coding for initiators of my 94 wars, the motives of initiators, and the outcomes of the wars they started. I used two indicators of success: military victory, and a more restrictive criterion based on the Clausewitzian maxim that war is an extension of politics by other means. Success is the ability of initiators to achieve their political goals. Where there was a controversy among historians about any category of coding—as there was in a limited number of cases—I used multiple codings to see if they made any significant difference.

The data indicate patterns of war initiation strikingly at odds with the expectations of realist, power transition and rational theories of war.

The most aggressive states are rising powers seeking recognition as great powers and dominant powers attempting to achieve hegemony. There were 119 initiators of 94 wars, as some wars had multiple initiators or multiple components with different initiators. Dominant powers account for 24 initiations and rising powers for 27. Together they are responsible for 47 of my 94 wars (there were co-initiators of 4 wars), or 46 percent of the wars fought between 1648 and 2003. Great powers initiated 49 wars (52 percent), less than half of which were against a dominant or another great power. Great power wars against dominant powers were most often in alliance with other great powers and part of a collective effort to keep a dominant power from achieving hegemony (Lebow 2010, chapt. 4).

Equally revealing are their motives states have for starting wars. As some initiators had multiple motives, there are more motives (107) than wars (94). Standing, which I credit as the motives for 62 wars, or 58 percent of the total, is by far the most common motive. It is followed by security (19 cases = 18 percent), revenge (11 = 10 percent), interest (8 = 7 percent) and other (7 = 7 percent). The eighteenth century is commonly considered the great era of dynastic rivalry in which rulers went to war for honour and standing. However, there is only irregular variation in the percentage of wars caused by standing across the centuries. Eleven of 16 wars were motivated by standing in the eighteenth century, 21 of 24 in the nineteenth century and 17 of 31 in the twentieth. Standing is consistently a leading motive, something not true of other motives. Security is a decidedly more important motive for war in the twentieth century, where it is a dominant or contributing motive for 11 wars, and only a total of nine in earlier centuries. Six of 9 wars motivated by interest took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when mercantilism was the accepted economic wisdom and leaders believed that the wealth of the world was finite. Most wars of revenge took place in the eighteenth century. The category of other is relatively uniform and it is difficult to offer generalizations about its diverse causes, although, as I noted earlier, most, if not all of them can ultimately be reduced to fear, interest or standing at the domestic level (Lebow 2010, chapt. 4).

Whilst standing is a consistent motive for war it is not uniform in its manifestations. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it found expression within a context of dynastic rivalry; rulers sought to achieve *gloire* through conquest. Many of the rulers of this era personally led their armies into battle (e.g., Louis XIV, Frederick I and II, Peter the Great), greatly enhancing their claims to *gloire*. By the nineteenth century this had changed; Napoleon was the last major ruler to appear regularly on the battlefield. The search for standing increasingly became a national concern, even in countries like Germany and Austria that could hardly be considered democratic. Foreign policymaking elites were still overwhelmingly aristocratic in origin and perhaps more intensely committed to gaining

or maintaining national honour now that traditional honor codes held less sway in interpersonal relations. Public opinion identified strongly with national states, also in countries where the intelligentsia and middle classes were kept at the peripheries of power and the status hierarchy. This phenomenon became more pronounced in the twentieth century and was a principal cause of World War I (Lebow 2008, 305–70).

Security has always been an important concern in international relations. My data nevertheless indicate that it is not a major cause of wars among the great powers. Only 19 of 94 wars appear to have been motivated by security all or in part. Seven of 18 initiators who appear to have acted out of concern for their security were also motivated by standing. World War I is a case in point. I contend that standing was a principal motive for German and Austrian leaders, while more conventional interpretations stress security (Lebow 2008, chapt. 7). Most of other nine war initiations I code as security-driven can confidently be attributed to this motive. They include the 1939 Soviet invasion of Finland and the Soviet attack in the same year on the Japanese Kwantung Army in Mongolia (Lebow 2010, chapt. 4). The relative insignificance of security as a motive is to some degree an artifact of my data set. I examine war initiation and, as we have seen, security only infrequently motivates initiators. It is unquestionably a primary concern for states who are the targets of their attacks.

Wars among the great powers are most often the result of miscalculation leading to unintended escalation. My data set includes nine wars among dominant and great powers. They account for about 90 percent of the casualties caused by great powers wars over the last five centuries (Levy 1983, chapt. 4).

<i>War</i>	<i>Initiator</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Cause</i>
Franco-Dutch (1672-1679)	D	I loses	ME
Grand Alliance (1688-97)	D	I loses	ME
Spanish Succession (1701-14)	D	I loses	ME
Austrian Succession (1740-48)	R	R wins	E
Seven Year's (1756-63)	R/D	I's lose	ME
French Revolutionary (1792-1815)	G/D	I's lose	multiple MFs
Crimean (1853-56)	G	I loses	ME
World War I (1914-18)	R/G	I's lose	ME/MF
World War II (1939-45)	G	I's lose	MF

D = dominant power; R = rising power; G = great power; I = initiator; ME = miscalculated escalation; E = escalation; MF = military failure; PF = erroneous calculations of adversarial resolve and domestic support

Figure 1: Wars between or among multiple great powers.

Initiators lost all the systemic wars they began. There are two principal reasons for this remarkable outcome. In 6 of 9 wars, it was the result of miscalculated escalation. Initiators sought to win short, isolated wars against weaker powers. Their aggressions provoked the intervention of other powers and ultimately led to their defeat. The second and related reason is military: initiators were not powerful enough to defeat the states they attacked or the coalitions they aroused against them.

Miscalculation of the balance of power or the likelihood of escalation has deeper causes than incomplete information. Rationalist, realist, and neorealist theories acknowledge the role of miscalculation in war initiation. They nevertheless assume that would-be initiators make reasonable efforts to assess the military balance and to devise strategies to design around the military advantages of opponents. Rational actors can still miscalculate because the political-military environment is often difficult to read. Leaders cannot know the resolve and military capability of adversaries with certainty, or the likelihood that public opinion and allies will rally to their support of states that are attacked. War, as Clausewitz (1832/1996, 119–22) famously observed, is characterized by friction and chance. Even in a world of incomplete information, rational leaders ought to have a better-than-even chance of getting it right if they gather pertinent information, assess its implications, and pre-emption aside, start wars only when they consider the likelihood of success to be high. The empirical record tells a different story. All but one initiator of a war that escalated into a systemic war ended up a loser. The figure is even higher for wars fought since 1945 for wars. Some eighty percent of initiators lost the wars they began, and an even higher percentage failed to achieve the goals for which they went to war (Lebow and Valentino 2009).

What explains this anomaly? Case studies indicate two principal causes for both kinds of decisional failures. The first is *motivated bias*. Leaders facing a combination of strategic and domestic threats they believe can only be surmounted by war, or a challenge to adversary that raises the prospect of war, must reduce the anxiety associated with a decision to move forward. They generally do so by denying the risk associated with their policies. They solicit supporting information and encouragement from subordinates and intelligence agencies and become insensitive to information, even warnings, that their policies may, or are likely to, lead to disaster (Janis and Mann 1977; 57–8, 197–233). Lebow (1981) and Stein, Snyder and Lebow (1984; Lebow and Stein 1994) documented this kind of motivated bias in a number of crisis decisions, including Germany, Austria and Russia in 1914, the US decision to cross the 38th parallel in Korea in 1950, India's 'Forward Policy,' that provoked its 1961 border conflict with China, Khrushchev's decision in 1962 to secretly deploy missiles in Cuba, Israel's intelligence failure in October 1973,

and Argentina's in its invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982. Minimal or self-serving risk assessment is also typical of actors seeking honour or standing, which can only be won by assuming great risks.

Secondly, *anger* can have the same effect. It enters the picture when leaders believe they or their state has been slighted. I documented its critical role in the Austro-Hungarian decision in 1914 and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2004 (Lebow 1981, chapt. 4; Lebow 2008, chapt. 9) where anger, associated with a concern for honour, combined to produce rash and ill-considered initiatives. Historical accounts indicate evidence for this phenomenon in Louis XIV's wars against the Netherlands and the Rhineland-Palatinate, the Wars of the Second and Third Coalitions and the Crimean War (Lebow 2008, chapt. 6).

Rational and offensive and defensive realist theories impute too much instrumental reason to actors. Leaders capable and willing to make the kinds of calculations rational theories require would also attempt to make serious estimates of the risks of war and, extraordinary situations aside, not resort to force unless the evidence indicated they had a high chance of achieving their political goals. In practice, initiators win slightly less than half of the wars they begin. They won 46, lost 45, drew 3. We can count the American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq as additional defeats. Of the victories won by rising, great and dominant powers, 26 were against weak or declining powers. Even these wars can escalate into wider, unanticipated and undesired wars against great or dominant powers. In almost every case where such escalation occurred, leaders of the initiator were to varying degrees insensitive to the risks of escalation and ended up losing the war. Initiators lost all 9 of the systemic wars they provoked. Initiators of all kinds appear to do a relatively poor job of estimating the military balance. Evidence from cases studies indicates a general tendency to overrate one's own military capability and to underestimate that of adversaries. Many initiators also expect their adversary to fight the kind of war they themselves are prepared to fight and win and are surprised when they resort to alternative strategies. As noted, this phenomenon has become even more pronounced since 1945 (Lebow and Valentino 2009).

The behaviour most strikingly at odds with rational theories of war, but consistent with classical realism, is the aggressiveness of dominant powers. Dominant states are generally not content with their status and authority. They seek more power through additional conquests and by doing so hope to be able to impose their preferences on others. Habsburg Spain, France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, Wilhelminian and Nazi Germany, and the United States in the post-Cold War era are cases in point. None of these states were seriously threatened by rising powers or coalitions of great powers. They went to war because they thought they were powerful enough to become more powerful still. For relatively

little prospective gain, they took great risks. These powers consistently defied the expectations of prospect theory. Aggressive dominant powers sought to control the European continent, if not the world. More troubling still for rational theories, their goals were clearly unrealistic. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth rightly observe that one of the enduring tragedies of great power politics “is precisely when decision-makers believe they can ignore counterbalancing constraints that they are most likely to call them forth with overambitious foreign policies” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008, 26).

The realist concept of the *security dilemma* finds little support. Only 19 wars were (according to my data) motivated by security. War, however, may not be the most appropriate test of the security dilemma. John Herz (1950), who introduced the concept, maintained that states only launched pre-emptive wars *in extremis*. Defensive realists attempt to define conditions, actual or perceptual, in which this occurs. The security dilemma may be responsible for insecurity, military build ups and the conflicts that result; I cannot use my data to evaluate this proposition. The data do suggest that the security dilemma can at most be responsible for only a few wars as security was the motive for less than 20 percent of great power wars. During the Cold War, the only so-called bipolar era in modern times, superpowers were as acutely sensitive to the loss and gain of Allies and clients as they were in eras of bipolarity. Such behaviour makes sense if we posit great power leaders as at least as much concerned with the effects on their standing, as they are with any military or economic benefits or costs from band wagoning or defection.

The logic of the security dilemma indicates that the most threatened states should be the weakest ones. More powerful states should feel less threatened, and dominant powers less threatened still. Kenneth Waltz (1979, 169–70) relies on this last inference for his claim that bi-polar systems are more stable and less war prone than their multi-polar counterparts. Because the two poles are so powerful *vis a vis* everyone else, they are that much more secure and less affected by the addition or defection of third parties to or from their respective blocs. My data (Lebow 2010, chapt. 4) offer no support for this eminently logical conjecture, quite the reverse. Six of the 19 wars motivated by security took place during the Cold War and all but one of them involved a superpower.

Balance of power theories (Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth 2007; Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979) assume that security is, or should be, the first concern of all states because of the anarchical nature of the international environment. Threat arises from the environment itself in the form of the security dilemma or from the ambitions of predatory states. Either phenomenon encourages states to augment their military capability and form alliances to deter would be-aggressors. Following Morgenthau (1948, 125, 155–9, 162–6), realists assume that war is least

likely when the status quo powers have a clear military advantage and a demonstrable will to use force to maintain the status quo. Conversely, war is most likely when an ‘imperialist’ power, to use Morgenthau’s language, or a coalition of them, have a military advantage or the status quo powers, for whatever reason, are unable to combine against them.

The data indicate mixed support at best for balance of power theories. Unfavourable balances of power fail to deter states seeking hegemony but do prevent their victories. This claim must be advanced with some caution because my data set does not include ‘non-wars’ that might have been deterred by an unfavourable balance of power, buttressed perhaps by effective practice of immediate deterrence. What emerges from this data set and other studies is a striking pattern of miscalculated escalation by great and dominant powers and their failure to win any of the systemic wars for which they are responsible (Jervis, Lebow, and Stein 1984; Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth 2007; Lebow 2010). This outcome speaks well for balancing as a measure of last resort, but not of war prevention.

The evidence for standing as a motive for war is strong. Standing ($n = 62$) accounted for 58 percent of the total motives ($n = 109$), putting it far ahead of security ($n = 20$, 18 percent), other ($n = 7$, 6 percent), revenge ($n = 11$, 10 percent) and interest ($n = 8$, 7 percent). It is the leading motive in every century of the almost four centuries included in the data set. Revenge, like standing, is an expression of *thumos* or spirit. Together, standing and revenge account for 73 of 107 motives. They are responsible for 68 percent of all wars (Lebow 2010, chapt. 4). These figures strike me as significant. The importance of standing as a motive of war may help explain the remarkable failure of so many initiators to make reasonable assessments of the military balance and the likelihood of escalation.

From the very beginning of civilization in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean basin individuals and political units have gained honour and standing through military prowess and secondarily through what Veblen (1934) calls conspicuous consumption. For almost the entire period of the data set, powers became great because of the military and economic might. In the late nineteenth century, war began to lose some of its appeal. This process accelerated after both world wars. Various European and non-European rising powers have been attempting, with some success, to claim standing on the basis of other criteria (Lebow 2008, 480–504). In the post-war period, Germany, Japan and now China have sought standing primarily by non-military means. This development seems long overdue as one of the defining characteristics of modernity is the opening of multiple pathways to honour and standing. To the extent that war is increasingly held in ill-repute, other means of claiming status will become more prominent and the frequency of war should decline.

4 Russia and Ukraine

Multiple analysts describe Vladimir Putin as a man with a mission. He sees himself as the descendant of Stalin, Lenin, and the czars, all committed to making Russia a great power, and its successor, the Soviet Union, a world power. As Lenin and the Bolsheviks sought to restore the territory of the former Russian Empire after the Civil War, so Putin is committed to restoring much of the former territory of the Soviet Union and, by doing so, making Russia a more respected and powerful player on the world stage (Hill and Gaddy 2017; Kotkin 2022). He is also much taken by traditional conceptions of *ruskii mir* (Russian world) adopted by Russian nationalists, who believe all Russian speaking people should be united in one state (Curanovic 2021; Laruelle 2015; Suslov 2020). Putin is on record as declaring the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century (ABC 2005). Stephen Kotkin (2022) suggests that Putin's aggression arises from the combination of the weakness of post-Soviet Russia and memories of its quest for grandeur. It produced "this paradoxical person who becomes more anti-Western than he was because the West is so powerful and Russia is so weak."

Putin and those around him view Ukraine and Belarus differently from other former republics of the Soviet Union. They are culturally and linguistically more akin to Russia, and key events in Russian history took place on their territory. Kiev was the first capital of the Russian state and is considered a sacred place by Russian Orthodox Christians. Ukraine is also important by virtue of its population, strategic location, and grain and industrial production. For all these reasons, Russian nationalists have never accepted Ukrainian claims to be a separate people with a right to their own country. Ukrainian nationalism was brutally suppressed by Stalin, and Putin has modelled himself on the former dictator. Under his leadership, Russia reannexed Crimea and lent military support to Russian nationalists in eastern Ukraine who sought to break away and join Russia. Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is an extension of this policy. Putin declared that Ukraine is not a neighbouring country, but "an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space" (Reid 2022).

Viewed in this light, the principal motive for this war is spirit. Putin was consumed by anger at the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire. He downplayed or ignored the extent to which this was attributable to the contradictions of communism and the Soviet state and its repressive policy towards non-Russian nationalities. He exaggerated the West's role in the Soviet collapse and no doubt believes his often-repeated assertions that the United States is committed to the further weakening of Russia. Putin feels slighted by the West, seethes with anger, and seeks revenge. Invading Ukraine is a means to this end and of asserting Russian power. Putin was intent on rebuilding the Soviet empire as was feasible and

gaining the same kind of figurative immortality as Peter the Great, Lenin, and Stalin.

Putin's anger is also focused on Ukraine. He is prepared to accept the independence of Belarus because it is only *de jure*. In practice, the country and its dictator are under Putin's thumb. Belarus participated in the invasion of Ukraine; its leader, dependent on Putin to stay in power, follows his orders. Putin sought a similar arrangement with Ukraine. It was briefly achieved during the presidency of Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovich (2002–05), now in exile in Russia. He rejected closer ties with the EU in favor of those with Russia. The Ukrainian parliament removed him from office and he fled the country (Wilson 2014). Ukraine's turn toward the West and continuing assertion of cultural independence is a second unacceptable slight in Putin's eyes. What Putin really fears is democracy. His complaints about NATO track nicely with pro-democratic developments in the Soviet near abroad—especially in Belarus and Ukraine. His declared goal of the invasion, the 'denazification' of Ukraine, is a cover for anti-democratic regime change (Person and McFaul 2022).

Deeply committed to integrating Ukraine into Russia, Putin convinced himself that his goal was realistic and readily achievable. Ukrainians would not resist, and many would welcome invading Russian forces. He dismissed the capability and commitment of Ukraine's army to defend their country. These delusions help to explain why the Russian army was so uninformed and unprepared. The intended scenario was a lightning occupation of the country and its capital with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky killed or forced to flee the country. Putin and at least some of his advisors were so committed to this scenario and so blind to the likely response of Ukrainians because effective resistance was utterly inconsistent with their deeply held belief that Ukrainians were not a people, Ukraine not a country, and its army not a worthy opponent. They were correspondingly resistant to information that called these beliefs into question. Putin has been in power for twenty years and has become the classic autocrat, whose skilful manipulation of elites accounts for his political longevity, but also the brittle nature of his personalist dictatorship (Frye 2021). He has surrounded himself with civilian, military, and intelligence lackeys (Kotkin 2022). He has bought their loyalty by letting many rob the Russian state and people of resources (Belton 2020; Dawisha 2015). He has narrowed the circle of his advisors to a few like-minded and subservient men from the security services (Belton 2020). Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu is a long-time crony with no military background (Curanovic 2021). Even if some of these officials had doubts about this venture, they almost certainly kept them to themselves. Thus, we have another example of the classic situation I described and documented in earlier books: a leader committed to a thoroughly unrealistic foreign policy who is not only deeply resistant to information warning

him of the dangers involved but who has rigged the feedback networks so no such information is brought to his attention.

Were other motives in play? It is possible that domestic political considerations help drive his aggressive foreign policies (McFaul 2020). Putin's popularity increased significantly in the aftermath of the short war with Georgia and the occupation of the Crimea. Polls suggest that his popular support had declined significantly in past few years, and he may have thought that another close to bloodless foreign policy success would boost his standing (Wilson 2017). But at most, I believe, this was regarded by him as an extra benefit of attacking Ukraine not a reason to do so.

To what extent was invasion a response to provocations by Ukraine or the West? Some analysts hold the West partially responsible for what has happened (Charap and Colton 2017; Taylor 2018, 170–9; Breslauer 2022). The most extreme version of this argument, and the one to receive the widest attention in the media, is made by John Mearsheimer (2014; Chotiner 2022). He argues that the West threatened Putin to the point where he saw war as his only alternative. NATO enlargement in the east, Western support for the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine, were directly threatening to 'core strategic interests' of Russia. The 'final straw' was the 'illegal' overthrow of Ukraine's President Yanukovich. In its immediate aftermath, Putin occupied the Crimea. Mearsheimer is undoubtedly correct in thinking that Putin was deeply offended by these Western actions, the democratization of Ukraine, and its overthrow of an utterly corrupt leader who was taking the country in direction opposed by most of its people. But he exaggerates the extent to which any of this posed a strategic threat to Russia. No Western combat forces were stationed in any of the new members of NATO. Their military forces were weak and trained for defensive strategies. There was no Western intention to incorporate Ukraine into NATO. NATO as a whole, and Germany especially, had reduced defence spending. The threat posed by the West was political, economic, and cultural, not strategic. Mearsheimer's brand of realism blinds him and his followers to the real causes of Putin's anger that have to do with the status of his country and, by extension, his standing as a leader.

Mearsheimer is not alone in treating Putin as a rational and calculating leader (Sakwa 2015). This is even more questionable. As noted, Putin is guilty of the most serious political and military miscalculations. These errors were not due to lack of information but unwillingness to examine and make reasonable inferences on information readily available to ordinary observers. Putin also misjudged the Western response, but here he might in part be forgiven. The West did very little in response to Russia's use of force in Georgia, occupation of the Crimea, and use of its military in support of Russian nationalists in eastern Ukraine. The sanctions it imposed, while not quite laughable, were readily circumvented, and might be

dismissed as more for show than real. This was not true of the initial unified response to the invasion of Ukraine. The sanctions this time around were for real and have seriously affected oligarchs supportive of Putin and the Russian people at large. Equally unexpected was military support for Ukraine, and at a level that has allowed it to halt the Russian offensive. As this article goes to press, Western aid, training, weapons, ammunition, and intelligence information be giving Ukraine a battlefield advantage.

Putin viewed the West “decadent, but self-corrupting, self-flagellating” and unlikely to respond in a significant way to his invasion of Ukraine (Kotkin 2022). He may also have inferred Western inaction on the basis of its acceptance of his invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014. Linear projection is always questionable, and especially in international relations. The Ukraine invasion represents a radical departure from Putin’s prior actions. Crimea did have a 75 percent majority Russian population and was historically part of Russia from 1783 until Nikita Khrushchev gave it to Ukraine in 1954 for domestic political reasons (Kramer 2022). Eastern Ukraine also had a large Russian population, and Putin was careful to provide some political cover to his operations there arguing that the military forces there were Russian ‘volunteers’ (Wilson 2014, 129–30, 134–35, 140–41). His invasion involved Russian forces, in massive numbers. It was the first act of territorial aggression in postwar Europe, and against a democratic state. It violated a long-standing norm and aroused enormous popular opposition. So did Russian military strategy, especially the deliberate shelling of civilians and numerous atrocities against them. To almost everyone’s surprise, Germany did an about-face, supported sanctions, and committed itself to supplying weapons to Ukraine. Cracks in the Western coalition are beginning to show, but Russia has been militarily humiliated and politically and economically isolated.

This kind of miscalculation, I noted earlier, is typical of authoritarian leaders or elites who embark upon aggressive foreign policies. Cases in point are bids for European hegemony by Philip II, Louis XIV, and Napoleon, and Japan’s attack on China in 1937 and against the Western powers in 1941, and Hitler’s bid for world conquest. To varying degrees, each of these madcap and costly initiatives brought also about the opposite results of those intended. This is also true of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. NATO has been strengthened, its members are spending more on defence, traditionally neutral Finland and Sweden have applied to join NATO. Instead of dividing the West, Putin has united it. Instead of conquering the Ukraine, he has helped solidify its democracy and pro-Western orientation. Instead of demonstrating Russian military power, he has exposed his country’s military weakness, bad leadership, and strategy. Instead of strengthening his standing abroad and power at home, he has undermined both. If Putin holds on to the territories partially occupied before the war by Russian

‘volunteers,’ he may claim victory and some Russians may believe in. The analogy here is to Khrushchev claiming victory in the aftermath of the missile crisis on the basis of Kennedy’s pledge not to invade Cuba. Hardly anybody was fooled and Khrushchev’s days were numbered.

5 Conclusions

What are the implications of Ukraine for international relations theory? I offer epistemological and conceptual observations. They begin with the recognition of the frequent irrationality of the leaders and the shoddy nature of the policy-making process in countries that draw the sword. Leaders and their advisors do not collect good intelligence, evaluate what information they have on hand, or make careful assessments of the likely short- and longer-term costs and gains of their proposed initiatives. Rather, they plunge into deep water trusting their instinct, skill, perceived righteousness of their cause, and perhaps, their luck. Not surprisingly, they fail or even meet with disaster far more often than they achieve success. The substantive and instrumental irrationality of Vladimir Putin is the norm, not the exception.

Wars are about security for those who are attacked, but this is rarely so for the initiator. My data set indicates that most wars are begun *for reasons of standing, honour, or revenge*. These motives account in part for the failure to conduct careful and comprehensive evaluations of the risks and possible costs of war. This pattern of behavior indicates that rationalism and modern realism bring inappropriate assumptions to the study of war.

Many realists contend that the world is a nasty place because of the anarchy of the international environment. They further argue that liberals and constructivists have a misplaced and dangerous faith in institutions and norms. John Mearsheimer (2001; 2014; Chotiner 2022) has banged on this drum for many years. If Putin were allowed to get away with his attempted conquest of Ukraine, if NATO had fragmented rather than congealed in response, and if China had become likely to attack Taiwan as a result, realists would have a powerful argument. Despite all efforts at strengthening regional and international institutions, international law, and binding nations together through trade and investment, the world would resemble the 1930s redux. However, if Russia is forced back to its military starting line, and Putin ultimately removed from power because of his abject defeat, NATO enlarged and strengthened, and China more cautious because of all these developments, international norms and institutions will have been strengthened. So too will the norm against war and territorial conquest. It is too early to render a verdict, but there are some grounds for optimism.

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