



Erosions, Ruptures, and the Ending of International Orders: Putin's Invasion of Ukraine in Historical Perspective

William Mulligan¹

Accepted: 15 April 2022 / Published online: 11 May 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

This article argues that Putin's invasion of Ukraine marks a distinctive challenge to the liberal international order. The invasion challenges principles of strategic restraint, demonstrates that economic interdependence can lead to violent conflict as well as promote cooperation and peace, and requires novel normative justifications. Initiated by Putin, the war also reveals broader contradictions within the liberal international order that date back to its construction in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Keywords Ukraine · Strategic restraint · Interdependence · Norms · International order

Politicians and commentators have regularly heralded the demise of the liberal international order. The global financial crisis, Russia's attack on Georgia and annexation of Crimea, Brexit, the Trump Presidency, the growth of Chinese power, and vaccine nationalism during the pandemic are amongst the most prominent markers of the erosion of the liberal international order. In 2021 *International Organization*, the scholarly journal most closely associated with liberal internationalist theories, ran a 75th anniversary edition. The editors celebrated the many achievements of the liberal international order—the formation of a 'pluralistic security community' in North America, Europe, and Japan; the institutional underpinnings of commercial and financial interdependence; and the development of an international human rights regime. The benefits of the liberal international order, they argued, have expanded from the original regional concentration in North America, western Europe, and Japan to cover large swathes of the globe, bringing economic uplift, an expansion of the rule of law and human

rights, and the reduced risk of inter-state war. But having quickly listed the achievements, the editors devoted much more attention to analysing the internal and external challenges to the LIO (its shorthand for the liberal international order). They conceded that liberal internationalist thought had 'skipped over', if not ignored, the contradictions in the LIO.¹

Although the challenges to the liberal international order have received considerable coverage in recent years, the reaction to Putin's decision to invade Ukraine has been of a different order. Francis Fukuyama, whose work on the end of history was a much more subtle account of the transformations of the late 1980s and early 1990s than has often been credited, pronounced that Putin's Russia is now considered a 'resentful, revanchist country intent on reversing the entire post-1991 European order.'² Martin Kimani, the Kenyan ambassador to the United Nations, framed the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the context of a global history of imperialist conquest. He concluded that the multilateral principle of international politics, which constituted a repudiation of the imperialist logic of power politics, 'lies on its deathbed tonight. It has

✉ William Mulligan
william.mulligan@ucd.ie

¹ School of History, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

¹ David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, Thomas Risse, 'Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on *International Organization*', *International Organization*, 75 (Spring 2021), pp. 225–57.

² Francis Fukuyama, 'Putin's War on the Liberal Order', *Financial Times*, 4 March 2022, Francis Fukuyama: Putin's war on the liberal order | Financial Times (ft.com).

been assaulted, as it has been by other powerful states in the recent past.³ At a meeting of European leaders on 10 March 2022, Macron declared that Putin had chosen to ‘turn back European history and return us to the logic of empires and confrontation.’⁴

These reactions raise the question of what is distinctive about Putin’s war against Ukraine in the context of the well-documented and persistent challenges to the liberal international order. Does the war mark a rupture in international politics, or does it represent an acceleration of the ongoing erosion of the liberal international order? Is the only novelty that it has taken place in Europe, thereby revealing the persistence of racialized hierarchies in the international order? Does the war result from the pathologies of Russian politics or does Putin’s foreign policy respond to developments within the international order?⁵ The claims that this war goes beyond the realm of an inter-state war to constitute a more fundamental rupture in the international order also have a political purpose, whether it be President Zelensky’s efforts to mobilize western states to support Ukraine and sanction Russia or President Biden’s interest in sketching this war as part of a larger battle between democratic and autocratic forces, playing out simultaneously on a global scale and in American politics.

Putin’s regime is solely responsible for initiating the war, but the war is also a product of contradictions in the liberal international order and the failure to manage these contradictions. This is evident in three ways. First, the Russian invasion challenges the principle of strategic restraint in the maintenance of international order, but it is also a response to the perceived absence of American and European restraint in their consolidation of post-Cold War gains in the 1990s. Second, the Russian resort to military force within the context of an interdependent international system demonstrates how patterns of economic interdependence can result in military conflict, despite the predictions of liberal theorists that deepening ties between societies and states reduces the salience of military force in international politics. Third, the Russian government’s denial of Ukrainian statehood is a novel challenge to norms of state sovereignty, one that distinguishes the Russian justifications for war from those of other conflicts since the end of the Cold War, though it also includes (perversely in the

view of this author) elements of earlier justifications, such as claims to prevent ethnic cleansing.

Before developing these three arguments, let us turn to a brief sketch of the histories of how previous international orders have collapsed. Major wars generally represent a failure of a particular international order, but a closer look at the collapse of international orders from the late eighteenth century suggests that major systemic wars did not mark a rupture but accelerated a process already in train. Three stylized examples demonstrate different processes of collapse: neglect, internal contradictions, and external challenges. The Vienna order, constituted after the Napoleonic Wars, stabilized international politics in Europe for over three decades. European leaders, however, began to neglect the institutions and norms that sustained peace after 1815, a process that accelerated during the 1848 revolutions, so that the Concert of Europe was hollowed out before the outbreak of the Crimean War (1854–6).⁶ Following the 1870/1 Franco-German War, the European great powers sustained peace amongst themselves for over four decades. Many of the institutions and practices that stabilized politics in Europe—alliances, military deterrence, imperial expansion at the cost of societies in Asia and Africa—ended up destabilizing the international order from about 1908.⁷ Finally, recent scholarship has argued that international politics achieved a brief period of stability in the mid-1920s, but the international order disintegrated during the ‘hinge years’ between 1929 and 1933, as economic nationalism, militarism, and racial geopolitics created a new logic leading to war in East Asia and Europe by the late 1930s.⁸ The erosion of the liberal international order has elements of all three processes—neglect, internal contradictions, and external challenges. That said, there are examples of radical changes in the international order in the absence of systemic war, notably the transition at the end of the Cold War; in contrast, the shift between a British- and American-dominated international order took place in the context of two world wars, in which the USA and British empire were partners.

The Demise of Strategic Restraint

One of the leading IR theorists of international order, John Ikenberry, has argued that a stable and enduring order requires the most powerful state or states to exercise strategic restraint,

³ Statement by Ambassador Kimani to UN Security Council, 21 February 2022, STATEMENT BY AMB. MARTIN KIMANI, DURING THE SECURITY COUNCIL URGENT MEETING ON THE SITUATION IN UKRAINE | Kenya

⁴ ‘Propos liminaires du président de la République’, 25 February 2022, elysee-module-19357-fr.pdf

⁵ For an introduction to this debate, see Elias Götz, ‘Russia, the West, and the Ukraine Crisis. Three Contending Perspectives’, *Contemporary Politics*, 22, 3 (2016), pp. 249–66; Elias Götz, Michael McFaul, ‘Correspondence: The Power of Putin in Russian Foreign Policy’, *International Security*, 46, 1 (2021), pp. 196–200.

⁶ Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford, 1994); Jennifer Mitzen, *Power in Concert. The Nineteenth Century Origins of Global Governance* (Chicago, 2013)

⁷ William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2017)

⁸ Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed. European International History, 1919–1933* (Oxford, 2007); Peter Jackson, *Beyond the Balance of Power. France and the Politics of National Security in the Era of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2013)

with the American construction of international order after 1945 serving as the primary example.⁹ By binding itself into institutional arrangements and norms, the leading states signal their restraint to other actors and make credible commitments about their future action. In exchange for foregoing immediate advantages, the hegemon gains long-term benefits from the international order. Weaker states recognize the self-denying ordinance of the hegemon and accept its leadership within the international order. States achieve security through the rules and institutions of the order, rather than through balance of power strategies. In turn, this reduces the costs of maintaining stability over the longer term. As Ikenberry has pointed out, strategic restraint is not a negation of power politics, but a particular way of pursuing power politics, enabling the leading state to preserve its position and enjoy security.

Putin has long argued that the eastward expansion of NATO and the European Union poses a threat to Russian security. In addition, some have argued that the expansion of NATO violates a pledge given by the Bush administration. On this reading, the USA and its European allies have failed to exercise strategic restraint and ignored Russian expectations of future conduct formed during the establishment of the post-Cold War order in Europe. By exploiting Russian weakness, they have created conditions that left Putin with few options but to use military force. The rules and practices of the international order operate to the persistent disadvantage of Russia to such an extent that the basic security needs of Russia require Putin to challenge openly the international order.

In recent years, historians have asked to what extent the USA and its allies exercised the strategic restraint in Ikenberry's prescriptions. Mary Sarotte has argued that the post-Cold War European order rested on a pre-fabricated multilateralism. In 1989 and 1990, political leaders considered a range of options, most famously Mikhail Gorbachev's 'common European home'. However, the Bush administration and Helmut Kohl's German government instead chose to expand successful Cold War institutions, NATO and the EU into eastern Europe. Designed to provide security to eastern European states and stabilize economies, the pre-fabricated solution also embedded the USA in European security politics, avoiding the spectre of American withdrawal from Europe that had followed the First World War. On the other hand, Sarotte concludes, the expansion of NATO and the EU aroused Russian security concerns.¹⁰ The very institutions that stabilized European politics after the end of the Cold War have now produced a violent backlash from Russia.

More specifically, IR scholars and historians have recently debated the significance of pledges given by American

negotiators to their Soviet counterparts in 1990. In February 1990, James Baker linked Soviet agreement to German reunification to a pledge not to expand NATO eastwards. Baker repeated the proposal not to expand NATO eastwards in a press conference, a public acknowledgment providing additional weight to the private diplomatic exchange. The informal character of the pledge, which was not written into a binding international agreement, reduced its normative status. The intricacies of the debate over the pledge can obscure broader questions. Eastern European states, fearful of long-term Russian ambitions, wanted to enter NATO. The capacity of sovereign states to decide their own security arrangements was a competing norm that trumped Russian concerns. Others have suggested that NATO expansion is an excuse manipulated by Putin to justify aggressive policies that have their origins in his own domestic position.¹¹

It is not clear that Putin is motivated in this war by an assurance made three decades earlier. NATO members made clear that Ukrainian membership was not imminent. NATO expansion eastwards reached its highpoint almost twenty years ago, so it hardly represented a novel threat that would require a significant alteration of Russian policy. EU expansion reached its highpoint in the accession rounds of 2004 and 2007. The Ukrainian application for membership of the EU became a central issue in the crisis of 2013/4, but it is the Russian invasion that has renewed the issue of Ukraine joining the EU, rather than prospective membership provoking a Russian attack.

Arguably, the USA and its allies have practised strategic restraint from the mid-2000s onwards. They have largely acquiesced in Putin's efforts to recreate a sphere of influence in large parts of the former Soviet Union. Russian policy has incorporated Belarus as a satellite state, while the intervention of Russian troops to suppress protests in Kazakhstan registered barely a meaningful reaction in Europe and North America. Russia's attack on Georgia in 2008 was widely condemned, but the political and economic response was muted. Most notably, the EU, USA and other countries imposed sanctions on Russia in the wake of its annexation of Crimea and its support for separatist movements in the Donbas. Yet these sanctions had no deterrent effect. Indeed, the initial Russian invasion and recognition of separatist republics in late February 2022 produced a limited response from the EU, the USA and Britain. Had Putin limited his war aims to securing these regions, western states may well have persisted in their initially limited response. In the absence of documents detailing diplomatic negotiations, intelligence briefings, and cabinet

⁹ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory. Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, 2019 edn).

¹⁰ Mary E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch. America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven, 2021); Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square. Rebuilding the World after 1989* (London, 2019).

¹¹ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, 'Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion', *International Security*, 40, 4 (2016), pp. 7–44; Kimberly Marten, 'NATO Enlargement: Evaluating its Consequences for Russia', *International Politics*, 57 (2020), 401–26; Marc Trachtenberg, 'The United States and NATO Non-Extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem', *International Security*, 45, 3 (2021), 162–203.

discussions, any judgment on this question remains difficult. If the USA and its European allies failed to exercise strategic restraint in the 1990s and early 2000s, the more recent record is of Russian aggression. That aggression makes the construction of order much more difficult because Russia has confirmed the perception that it menaces independent states in the lands of the former Soviet Union and eastern bloc. In turn, these states have a clear incentive to cleave more closely to NATO and the EU. Moreover, recent strategic restraint on the part of the USA and EU has not produced reciprocal Russian restraint in the region. Hence, there are questions over the stabilizing effects of hegemonic strategic restraint in sustaining the liberal international order.¹²

Power Politics and Economic Interdependence

The absence of Russian restraint reflects, in part, the asymmetries of power relations between Russia, Ukraine, and western powers within an interdependent system. The early stages of the war have demonstrated the persistent importance of global economic, social, and cultural interdependence in the international order. Despite the twin hits of the global financial crisis and the pandemic, the world remains highly interdependent. From the sale of Chelsea F. C. by Roman Abramovich, a Russian billionaire, to the debates about gas prices, the commercial and cultural networks that connect Russia with Europe and North America are the stuff of everyday newspaper coverage.

Intellectual interest in the effects of interdependence on international politics dates back at least as far as Montesquieu and his ‘doux commerce’ thesis about the pacifying effects of trade. Today’s interdependent global system has its origins in the 1970s and optimism about international peace resulting from globalization reached its apogee with theories about democratic and capitalist peace in the 1990s and early 2000s.¹³ Interdependence has remade power relations between states, but in bestowing significant advantages on certain actors, particularly the USA and European Union, it also raises the risks that weaker states may militarize their foreign policy in order to compensate for their weakness in other modes of power. This process has played out before,

notably before the First World War. Before 1914 Russian decision-makers, ‘[b]ereft of [economic] weapons, were forced to utter military threats.’¹⁴

Theorists have devoted considerable research to how interdependence creates power resources. In the 1970s, two leading IR theorists in the USA, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, developed ‘complex interdependence’ as an ideal type with three characteristics. First, multiple networks connected societies and these transnational connections were distinct from inter-state relations. Second, states grappled with a wide range of issues (economic, financial, environmental, cultural, and so on) and military security was not the overriding priority. Third, military force plays a minor role in complex interdependence, because the risk of inter-state war is low and military force is irrelevant to resolving many issues (e.g. trade disputes). Far from denying power politics, Keohane and Nye’s model of complex interdependence was saturated by power relations. Asymmetries in interdependence provided some states, notably the USA, with considerable power.¹⁵ By the early 2000s, Joseph Nye was arguing that American global pre-eminence lay in soft power, which ‘rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others’, particularly in ‘an attraction to shared values’.¹⁶ Indeed, the historian, Geir Lundestad, had already contrasted the post-Second World War positions of the USA and Soviet Union. Both formed empires, but critically the American dominance was ‘empire by invitation’, where ‘Washington’s supremacy was more in accordance with the will of the local populations.’¹⁷ The power of the European Union in international politics has also become a theme of scholarly research with particular attention to the EU’s market power.¹⁸ On this reading, interdependence both produces and reflects American and, to a lesser extent, EU, power in global affairs. Moreover, American and European power resources are fungible, so that advantages in one domain (financial markets or cultural appeal) can translate into gains in other areas, such as territorial and military security.

In contrast to Nye’s concept of soft power working through attraction, Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman’s recent studies of weaponized interdependence suggest that interdependence also lends itself to more coercive modes of influencing rival states. Dense financial, informational, and cultural connections provide states that have ‘political authority over the central

¹² See the recent exchange between John Mearsheimer and John Ikenberry in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*. Although the exchange centred on the rise of China, the broader arguments analysed the structures of the international order: John J. Mearsheimer, ‘The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics’, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021; G. John Ikenberry, ‘A Rival of America’s Making? The Debate over Washington’s China Strategy’, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2022.

¹³ For a review of the literature, see Edward D. Mansfield, Brian M. Pollins, ‘The Study of Interdependence and Conflict: Recent Advances, Open Questions, and Directions for Future Research’, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 45, 6 (2001), pp. 834–859.

¹⁴ Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London, 2015), p. 77; William Mulligan, Jack S. Levy, ‘Rethinking Power Politics in an Interdependent World, 1871–1914’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 49, 4 (2019), pp. 611–40.

¹⁵ Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence. World Politics in Transition* (New York, 1977).

¹⁶ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, 2004), pp. 5–7.

¹⁷ Geir Lundestad, *The American “Empire” and Other Studies of US Foreign Policy in a Comparative Perspective* (Oxford, 1990), 55.

¹⁸ For example, see Anu Bradford, *The Brussels Effect. How the European Union rules the World* (Oxford, 2020).

nodes in international networked structures' with the opportunity to impose costs on other states. They identify two strategies—the panopticon, which provides the state with control over central nodes of the network with the capacity to conduct surveillance over relationships and gather information; and the chokepoint strategy, which allows states to cut rivals off from critical networks. Their 2019 article noted that the location of the SWIFT headquarters in Belgium gave the European Union the means to cut off Russia from this important financial network.¹⁹ These analyses of power in an interdependent system, be it coercive or 'soft', beg the question of how weaker states might respond to asymmetric power relations.

The USA and European Union have exploited these power relations to advance their values and institutions right to Russia's border. Russia's neighbours in eastern Europe have looked to the USA and EU for various reasons—as a source of security against Russia, for economic opportunity, and political stability. Although interdependence also gives Russia powerful levers (notably over energy supplies, capital, social media), Moscow has generally been at a disadvantage, particularly in its efforts to influence neighbours. As a result of its disadvantages, there has been a temptation to use military force. Take the crisis in 2013/4 that led to Russia's annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine. In autumn 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich found himself faced with opportunities to sign an agreement with the EU or to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Putin's project to use economic levers to tie former Soviet republics to Russia. The Russian offer to Ukraine was, in economic terms, an attractive one and Yanukovich turned down the EU's offer. This latter decision, however, resulted in the mass protests at Maidan and Yanukovich's administration fell in early 2014 when he fled to exile in Russia. The protests were motivated, in part, by a popular desire for closer relations with the EU and more distant relations with Russia. This was also a conflict between democratic values and authoritarian politics. Putin's response was to seize Crimea by force and initiate military conflict in eastern Ukraine.²⁰

The resort to military action in 2014 (and in 2008 against Georgia and 2022) reflects Russian weakness in critical areas of power politics in an interdependent world.²¹ Russian military action also exacerbates its own security dilemma. By using military force against its neighbours, it confirms the

fears of neighbouring states about Russian aggression and pushes these states closer together in military alliances and rearmament. On the other hand, Russian military action poses challenges for the status quo powers in the liberal international order. International orders risk becoming meaningless if the norms and institutions are not enforced and states can violate them with relative impunity. It remains an open question of whether sanctions (weaponized interdependence) and soft power can effectively counter military force. In the short term, military force will trump any other mode of power.

For theorists of the liberal international order and power politics, the war raises questions about how interdependence can produce pathways towards military conflict. The asymmetries in power relations between Russia on the one hand and the USA and EU on the other hand are magnified by interdependence. Russia may make occasional gains and score tactical victories. That said, outcomes such as the election of Trump and Brexit, both damaging to the liberal international order, owed much more to domestic political fissures and long-standing social problems than to Russian manipulation. In the competition for influence in the 'near abroad', Russia has had to use military force to compensate for its lack of soft power and commercial appeal.

This creates a paradox. On the one hand, supporters of the liberal international order may not be able to mobilize power relations to sustain the rules of the game in the face of military attacks; on the other hand, the asymmetries of power relations may favour the status quo powers, which occupy central positions in interdependent networks, to such an extent that other states, seeking to advance their own interests, may have few options but to resort to military force.

The war also raises questions about the dynamics of globalization. Kevin O'Rourke has reviewed historical cases of deglobalization and has pointed to the backlash of groups who have lost out (or who perceive themselves to have lost out) as a result of globalization.²² The war injects a different dynamic. The imperatives of power politics may require deglobalization, a sundering of economic connections. States would seek to limit financial and trade relations because it renders them vulnerable to external pressures. European energy dependency on Russia had been a controversial issue before the invasion of Ukraine, while since 2014 Russian officials have prepared countermeasures to mitigate the risks of being cut off from SWIFT. Another strategy is to change trade patterns and capital flows. This strategy would result in significant change in global economic relations, but it would not lead to deglobalization. These changes impose costs, but the scale of global economic interdependence makes it easier to find alternative partners. European efforts to find new energy supplies from the USA and Middle

¹⁹ Henry Farrell, Abraham L. Newman, 'Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion', *International Security*, 44, 1 (2019), 42–79; see also Daniel W. Drezner, Henry Farrell, Abraham L. Newman, eds, *The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence* (Washington DC, 2021).

²⁰ Adam Tooze, *Crashed. How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (London, 2018); Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace. The Inside Story of Russia and America* (London, 2018), 393–408.

²¹ Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected. Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (Oxford, 2021) argues that 'Russia's capabilities are beginning to approach its global aspirations', x; her work analyses the sources of Russian power across a range of areas.

²² Kevin Hortsøj O'Rourke, 'Economic History and Contemporary Challenges to Globalization', *Journal of Economic History*, 79, 2 (2019), pp. 356–82.

East and talk of increased trade between Russia and China demonstrate the potential for this development.

Justifying War

The resort to military force further compounded Russian weakness in the international order. Russia is far from isolated as reactions from the Chinese, Indian, and other governments at the UN make clear. Nonetheless, the Russian invasion has had the effect of uniting the USA and European countries as governments (and most citizens) agree that Putin has violated international norms. This outrage has raised questions about moral equivalence between the Russian action and attacks on other sovereign states since the end of the Cold War. NATO interventions in the Yugoslav Wars, the American-led wars in the Middle East, and the military action to overthrow the Qaddafi regime in Libya loomed large in the responses of Russian analysts, who cast doubt on claims that the invasion represents a significant violation of long-standing norms and practices in post-Cold War politics. Ambassador Kimani's reference in the UN Security Council to the actions of other powerful states in the recent past was a reference to concerns about the American-led invasion of Iraq, including warnings from the African Union in 2003 about the destabilizing effects of the invasion. Michael McFaul, American ambassador to Russia, noted that although Medvedev declined to veto UN approval for intervention in Libya, Putin considered American, British, and French military action against Qaddafi's regime as significant breach of international norms. Others point to Russia military action in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea or Pakistani incursions into Kargil in the Kashmir as examples of invasions of foreign territory. On this reading, invasions of other states remain a common-place and norms of state sovereignty are regularly violated by the most powerful states.

Despite the examples of other violations of state sovereignty, analysis of Russian justifications for the invasion of Ukraine and reactions to these justifications reveal a distinctive challenge to international norms. The purpose of the analysis is not, as Quentin Skinner pointed out many years ago, to establish whether the agent believes what they are saying, but to explore what options an agent can choose from the normatively available language.²³ The fact that a politician offers a reason that goes beyond reasons of material security is significant, suggesting that it is politically important to offer an account of one's actions. Rhetorical strategies of justification are politically important for several reasons. First, the justification can mobilize domestic public support for war. Second, a successful rhetorical strategy can hamstring the response of other states by creating doubts about intentions and hampering

rival governments' capacity to persuade their citizens to endure sacrifice. As Stacie Goddard pointed out, Hitler's use of the language of self-determination in the 1930s made it more difficult for British and French governments to rally public support for stronger measures against the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the Anschluss of Austria in 1938.²⁴ Generally, leaders adapt existing principles to justify their action (such as self-determination). The agent, as Skinner noted, can either tailor their projects to the prevailing normative context—or they can seek to alter the normative context.²⁵ The capacity to shape the normative environment is an essential element of power politics.

Generally, governments have framed the use of military force to attack or to invade another country in four different ways since the end of the Cold War. First, they have invoked humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect vulnerable populations from ethnic cleansing and genocide (NATO's military action against Serbia). Second, states have pursued a strategy of regime change following invasion (the American-led coalition's invasion of Iraq). Third, states have argued that they have the right to initiate a preventive war to stave off an attack in the foreseeable future. This was central to the American and British rhetorical strategies at the United Nations in the build-up to the Iraq War in 2003. Fourth, as Dan Altman has argued, states occupy or annex a limited amount of territory in another state with a view to limiting or even avoiding war. His findings suggest that contrary to scholarly consensus conquest has not declined since 1945, but rather it has evolved. Before 1945, states attacked their enemy with a view to annexing territory as a result of war; now states seize territory first and then try to avoid or limit war.²⁶ Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 fits this pattern, but the invasion of Ukraine appears a novel practice in the context of post-World War II international politics.

And such a novel practice requires a justification. In Skinner's terms, Putin is an 'innovating ideologist', attempting to forge a novel justification. In diplomatic exchanges and rambling speeches, Putin and his officials advanced a range of claims about their rights to invade Ukraine, including stopping the persecution of ethnic Russians and the denazification of the Ukrainian state. The recognition of pro-Russian separatist regions, Donetsk and Luhansk, on 21 February as independent republics also lay within the range of justifications for war and invasion used by other states. Although European and American governments condemned this Russian action, the limited suite of sanctions

²³ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002) is a collection of seminal essays, dating back to the 1970s.

²⁴ Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might. Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca, 2018).

²⁵ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1978), ix–xiii

²⁶ Dan Altman, 'The Evolution of Territorial Conquest after 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm', *International Organization*, 74 (Summer 2020), pp. 490–522.

suggested a *modus vivendi* might be found, just as had happened after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

A few days later, on 24 February, Putin ordered military attacks on Ukraine. Putin has justified the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in part, on the grounds that Russians and Ukrainians have a shared nationhood. Putin's denial of Ukrainian statehood marked a novel justification for the use of military force. In contrast to the other justifications, Putin's argument suggested that the very existence of a Ukrainian state lacked legitimacy. Although Russian war aims appear to have scaled back in late March and early April to concentrate on territorial gains in eastern Ukraine, Putin's initial justifications and the scale of Russian military mobilizations in February 2022 aimed at the elimination of Ukraine as an independent state. The Russian president had laid the foundations for this argument well in advance of the invasion. In the June 2021 issue of the annual Direct Line television show, when Putin answers questions posed by Russian citizens, he argued that 'Ukrainians and Russians are one people', he distinguished between the 'unfriendly' government in Kyiv and the Ukrainian people, and he claimed that President Zelensky had put Ukraine under 'external administration'.²⁷ As promised in Direct Line, he elaborated his arguments the following month in an article on 'The Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'.²⁸ He traced the history of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians to Ancient Rus, the 'largest state in Europe'. He ascribed the development of Ukrainian national identity in the mid-nineteenth century to Polish nationalists and the Austro-Hungarian empire, which sought to weaken the unity of the Russian empire. Meanwhile 'modern Ukraine' was forged in the Soviet era, when the Bolsheviks 'robbed' Russia and bestowed 'gifts' on other nationalities within the Soviet Union. Although the final sentence conceded that Ukrainian citizens could determine the future of their country, the thrust of his argument was encapsulated in his claim that 'the true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia.' In the months between his Direct Line interview and the invasion, he returned again and again to these arguments, setting out a justificatory strategy for invasion that went far beyond concerns about Ukraine's relationship with NATO and the EU.

The reaction to Putin's decision and argument suggests that his justification for the war constitutes what John Austin called an 'unhappy speech act', one that failed to convince his audience, at least in Europe and North America. Putin's failure to convince governments and citizens in Europe and North America lay not simply in the scale of the Russian challenge to security interests, but also in the combination of military force and the absence of a normatively acceptable and

convincing justification. This rhetorical failure has already had political consequences, making it easier for western governments to impose sanctions on Russia and deliver significant military aid to Ukraine. Ukrainian officials and civil society have effectively rebutted Putin's claims about the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians; in the longer term, their success may buttress Ukraine's sovereignty and independence. More broadly, the early results of the rhetorical duel between Putin and Zelensky suggest that norms against conquest of a sovereign state remain robust, though more partial conquests remain plausible options for expansionist regimes.

Conclusion

Historians, particularly diplomatic historians, are sceptical of ascribing inevitability to any process. The prospective end of the liberal international order may appear over-determined, beset by internal contradictions and neglect, changing distribution of power, and external challenges. Putin's decision to invade Ukraine presents a unique challenge—to strategic restraint, to the practices of power politics in an interdependent system, and to the normative environment. Although separated for the purpose of this analysis, these issues are interwoven—the asymmetries of power result in the resort to military force, which requires a novel justification challenging accepted norms. In turn, the war has already had significant effects on the international order, from the commitment of the German government, led by Social Democratic Chancellor Olaf Scholz, to increase massively military spending, to the Russo-Chinese declaration of friendship on the eve of the invasion. The outcome—and how states make sense of what might be a messy outcome—will shape attitudes to the use of military force and economic sanctions, to future economic relationships, and to normative expectations. The undoing of international order is not an inevitable process. Successful containment can bolster international order (as happened in the 1830s in the Concert of Europe) and crisis management can broaden the diplomatic tools to adapt norms and institutions (as happened before 1914).

The war also raises questions for scholars about our disciplines and how historians and IR theorists explain the collapse of international orders. In the final edition of *Talking Politics* on 3 March 2022, the political scientist, David Runciman, remarked that of all the events had covered in the podcast series since 2016, the Russian attack on Ukraine is an event of a 'different scale'. His co-presenter, Helen Thompson, noted that they had covered other wars and that Russia had already used military force to change borders in Europe. 'We already lived in the world that we now do', she noted, but had not come to terms with the changes, a deft acknowledgement of the difficulty of identifying markers of historical change.²⁹

²⁷ About Russians, Ukrainians, WWII — Putin on international affairs at Q&A session - Russian Politics & Diplomacy - TASS

²⁸ Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" • President of Russia (kremlin.ru)

²⁹ *Talking Politics* Podcast, 3 March 2022, 3.50 minutes.

War constitutes a challenge to international order, but the outbreak of war reveals the erosion of the practices and norms that underpinned stable relations. Present events also cast new light on the significance of the past. Economic interdependence, widely understood to promote peace, can alter power relations and lead to military conflict. The making of international order brings peace and stability, but it also produces hierarchies and exclusions. Norm entrepreneurs develop justifications for one context (such as self-determination), which are then perverted to justify aggression in another context, demonstrating the difficulty of managing the normative environment. The liberal international order is not doomed (yet) and its demise is often over-determined, but no political order lasts indefinitely. The final and arguably most important test for a political order is how its demise is managed and enacted. Wars are costly and catastrophic evidence of the failure to manage change, but other transitions—notably the end of the Cold War and the courageous decision of the Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev to accept its loss of control in eastern Europe—demonstrate there are other potential futures.

Funding Open Access funding provided by the IReL Consortium.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

References

- Altman, D. 2020 The Evolution of Territorial Conquest after 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm. *International Organization*, 74 (Summer), 490–522.
- Bradford, A. 2020. *The Brussels Effect. How the European Union rules the World* (Oxford).
- Drezner, D.W., Farrell, H., & Newman, A.L. eds. 2021 *The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence* (Washington DC).
- Farrell, H., & Newman, A.L. 2019. Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion. *International Security*, 44(1), 42–79.
- Fukuyama, F. 2022. Putin's War on the Liberal Order. *Financial Times*, 4 March 2022.
- Goddard, S.E. 2018. *When Right Makes Might. Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca).
- Götz, E. 2016. Russia, the West, and the Ukraine Crisis. Three Contending Perspectives. *Contemporary Politics*, 22(3), 249–66.
- Götz, E., & McFaul, M. 2021. Correspondence: The Power of Putin in Russian Foreign Policy. *International Security*, 46(1), 196–200.
- Ikenberry, G.J. 2019. *After Victory. Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, 2019 edn).
- Ikenberry, G.J. 2022. A Rival of America's Making? The Debate over Washington's China Strategy. *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2022.
- Itzkowitz Shiffrin, J.R. 2016. Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion. *International Security*, 40(4), 7–44.
- Jackson, P. 2013. *Beyond the Balance of Power. France and the Politics of National Security in the Era of the First World War* (Cambridge).
- Keohane, R., & Nye, J. 1977. *Power and Interdependence. World Politics in Transition* (New York).
- Kimani, M. 2022. Statement by Kenyan Ambassador Kimani to UN Security Council, 21 February 2022.
- Lieven, D. 2015. *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London).
- Lundestad, G. 1990. *The American "Empire" and Other Studies of US Foreign Policy in a Comparative Perspective* (Oxford).
- Lake, D.A., Martin, L.L., & Risse, T. 2021. Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on *International Organization*. *International Organization*, 75 (Spring), 225–57.
- Macron, E. 2022. Propos liminaires du président de la République, 25 February 2022.
- Mansfield, E.D., & Pollins, B.M. 2001. The Study of Interdependence and Conflict: Recent Advances, Open Questions, and Directions for Future Research. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 45(6), 834–859.
- Marten, K. 2020. NATO Enlargement: Evaluating its Consequences for Russia. *International Politics*, 57, 401–26.
- McFaul, M. 2018. *From Cold War to Hot Peace. The Inside Story of Russia and America* (London).
- Mearsheimer, J.J. 2021. The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics. *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021.
- Mitzen, J. 2013. *Power in Concert. The Nineteenth Century Origins of Global Governance* (Chicago).
- Mulligan, W., & Levy, J.S. 2019. Rethinking Power Politics in an Interdependent World, 1871–1914. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 49(4), 611–40.
- Mulligan, W. 2017. *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge).
- Nye, J.S. 2004. *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York).
- O'Rourke, K.H. 2019. Economic History and Contemporary Challenges to Globalization', *Journal of Economic History*, 79(2), 356–82.
- Putin, V. 2021. On the Historical Unity of the Russians and Ukrainians, July 2021.
- Sarotte, M.E. 2021. *Not One Inch. America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven).
- Schroeder, P. 1994. *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford).
- Skinner, Q. 2002. *Visions of Politics, Regarding Method* (Cambridge).
- Skinner, Q. 1978. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1 (Cambridge).
- Spohr, K. 2019. *Post Wall, Post Square. Rebuilding the World after 1989* (London).

- Steiner, Z. 2007. *The Lights that Failed. European International History, 1919–1933* (Oxford).
- Stoner, K.E. 2021. *Russia Resurrected. Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (Oxford).
- Tooze, A. 2018. *Crashed. How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (London).
- Trachtenberg, M. 2021. The United States and NATO Non-Extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem. *International Security*, 45(3) 162–203.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

William Mulligan is a professor in the School of History at University College Dublin. He specializes in the history of international relations and his publications include *The Great War for Peace* (Yale UP, 2014) and *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge UP, 2017). He has held fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.