

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict through Thucydidean lenses: fear, honor, and interest revisited

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Abstract. In the backdrop of modern international relations, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict illustrates the enduring complexity of geopolitical struggles, emphasizing the significance of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law's influence on global security and diplomatic relations. Thucydides' insights on the motivations of fear, honor, and interest provide a critical lens to analyze such conflicts, elucidating the motivations and strategies of involved states. The paper employs these concepts to dissect the underlying causes and potential impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, revealing how Russia's pursuit of honor and interest, Ukraine's fear for its sovereignty, and the West's commitment to democratic values and international law intricately shape the conflict's dynamics.

Keywords: diplomatic relations, Russia-Ukraine conflict, democratic values.

1. Introduction

A major development in modern international relations, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict brings to light the persistent complexity of geopolitical conflicts in the post-Cold War age. This conflict, which started with the "Euromaidan protests" in 2014 and intensified with the Crimean crisis, has profoundly impacted the political and security landscape in Eastern Europe and beyond, posing important queries regarding national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law. Its significance stems from its wider ramifications for international relations, alliances, and global security and its direct effects on Russia and Ukraine.

Thucydides' classic work, "History of the Peloponnesian War," provides a critical viewpoint for comprehending these wars. It provides ageless insights into human nature and the motivations of honor, fear, and interest that push states to war. The underlying causes for political activities and the inevitable conflicts resulting from conflicting interests and aspirations are clarified by Thucydides' analytical framework. This essay seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the motivations and strategies of the parties involved in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict by applying Thucydides' ideas of fear, honor, and interest to the situation. By doing this, we hope to improve our comprehension of the origins, development, and potential effects of the war on international relations and global security architecture.

2. Theoretical Framework

The ancient historian Thucydides proposed the theoretical framework of fear, honor, and interest, which provides a crucial lens through which to analyze and comprehend modern international relations. In his study of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides (1919) makes the case that these three fundamental motivations serve as the main forces behind the decisions made by states and their leaders, affecting the dynamics of interstate relations and the path of history.

Fear is recognized as an essential motivator, frequently resulting from the impression that a state's security or even survival is in danger (Thucydides, 1919). To lessen perceived dangers, it pushes states to form strategic alliances, take preventative measures, or initiate conflicts. In modern geopolitics, fear is manifested in the emergence of security issues as states create defensive alliances and engage in arms races out of apprehension about possible external aggression. As demonstrated by the NATO-Russia standoff over Eastern Europe, this can heighten tensions and lead to a

confrontation that eventually becomes self-fulfilling. Actions by states, which are frequently interpreted as preventive measures, may unintentionally convey hostility and increase global instability.

Despite its seeming antiquity, honor is still relevant today in the form of pride in one's country, prestige, and the desire to be recognized internationally (Thucydides, 1919). States are obligated by honor to keep their word, protect their standing, and occasionally take action to retaliate against injustices or establish their supremacy (Thucydides, 1919). The upholding of a state's power within international organizations, military actions, and diplomatic efforts are all examples of the pursuit of honor. To avoid coming across as weak, this pursuit of honor may result in assertive measures like military interventions or rigid diplomatic positions. One way to understand China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, for instance, is as an effort to preserve national sovereignty and honor.

Interest is the pragmatic consideration of governments looking to improve their wealth, influence, and standing in the international system. It encompasses a wide variety of economic, strategic, and political purposes (Thucydides, 1919). Interest drives a nation's foreign policy and strategic choices while safeguarding the multifaceted national interests, which remains the paramount criterion of contemporary state behavior. International talks, bilateral relationships, and trade policies are all shaped by the pursuit of interests. The current trade spat between the United States and China highlights how nations balance their economic goals against conflicting geopolitical interests (Kwan, 2020). Moreover, since the 19th century, Britain has upheld the diplomatic principle that there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests (Ratcliffe, 2016).

The tripartite framework of Thucydides is still relevant today when applied to the study of international affairs. It helps to understand the dynamics of alliances and rivalries, the underlying motivations of state behavior, and the causes of wars. By applying the lenses of fear, honor, and interest to current concerns, analysts can anticipate future flashpoints, comprehend the strategic calculations underlying the global order, and obtain a clearer understanding of the multifaceted reasons that drive states (Lebow, 2006). Thus, Thucydides' paradigm not only improves our understanding of past battles but also offers a useful instrument for deciphering the complexities of contemporary international relations.

3. Analysis of Russia'S Action

A comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and underlying causes of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be obtained by applying Thucydides' theoretical framework to the situation. In his Peloponnesian War study, Thucydides emphasizes the reasons behind the war, which have striking similarities to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

First, fear was identified by Thucydides (1919) as one of the main drivers of war. Given Ukraine's inclinations toward the West, the European Union, and NATO, it is possible to understand Russia's activities in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as motivated by a fear of losing its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe (Tsygankov, 2018). Strategic interests in the area, such as military, economic, and geopolitical factors, exacerbate this anxiety. Ukraine is contesting Russia's dominance by pursuing independence and sovereignty as a means of achieving its own goals of security and power. Russia has, therefore, resorted to military action to safeguard its geopolitical objectives and create a security buffer zone because of its anxiety.

Second, honor plays a significant role in the actions of states (Thucydides, 1919). Russia's actions, including the annexation of Crimea and its support for separatist organizations in Eastern Ukraine, might be understood in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as an attempt to uphold and improve its national honor and reputation. This pursuit of honor is fundamental to Russia's narrative throughout history and to its status as a major state. Russia intends to demonstrate its defiance against perceived Western power encroachments into its sphere of influence, especially NATO and the EU, by exercising its control over Ukraine, in addition to solidifying its position as the main regional power (Tsygankov, 2018).

Moreover, interest—which includes strategic, political, and economic goals—is yet another major driver of Russia's engagement in the war (Thucydides, 1919). Control over Crimea and portions of Eastern Ukraine gives strategic military advantages, including access to the Black Sea, and Ukraine is economically vital as a transit route for Russian natural gas to Europe (Tank and Ospanova, 2022). From a political standpoint, Russia's strategic objective of retaining its geopolitical supremacy in the region and creating a buffer zone against Western influence is in line with halting Ukraine's westward movement towards the EU and NATO (D'Anieri, 2023). Additionally, Russia emphasizes the protection of its historical and cultural interests as a significant aspect of its engagement. The repeated assertions of Russia's historical ties with Ukraine serve as a justification for its actions, with President Putin's speeches at the onset of the conflict analyzing and underscoring the shared heritage and deep-rooted connections between the two nations (Vladimir, 2021). This narrative of historical and cultural kinship is strategically employed to legitimize Russia's involvement, portraying it as a protector of its cultural sphere and historical legacy in the face of perceived encroachments (Vladimir, 2021).

The international community presents differing interpretive stances about these three motivations, which are embodied by the West and the Global South, indicating notable disparities in global viewpoints. On the one hand, the idea that Russia's motivations are essentially honor- and interest-driven is the basis for Western criticism of Russia's actions. In this sense, honor refers to Russia's wish to preserve and display its position as a major power, which reflects its historical standing and influence on the international scene. This endeavor demonstrates a concerted attempt to regain Russia's major power status and safeguard its geopolitical interests in the face of shifting global dynamics. It relates to Russia's strategic and economic aspirations. These goals are representative of Russia's attempts to reclaim its position as a major power and to safeguard its strategic objectives in the face of changing geopolitical conditions (D'Anieri, 2023).

On the other hand, countries in the Global South, most notably China, view Russia's activities differently and emphasize fear as the main driver (Chestnut Greitens, 2022). According to this viewpoint, Russia's military and diplomatic actions in Ukraine are more likely to be a reaction to perceived challenges to its security and sphere of influence than a means of enhancing its honor. According to the fear-mongering narrative, Russia must respond defensively because it perceives NATO expansion and deeper links between Ukraine and the West as existential dangers (Chestnut, 2022). This perspective is consistent with Thucydides' paradigm, which clarifies the significant influence of fear on state behavior in geopolitical confrontations in addition to honor and interest.

Therefore, the analysis of Russia's motivations in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict reveals a dichotomy in international perceptions, with the West focusing on the notions of honor and interest, while countries like China perceive fear as the dominant force. This dichotomy highlights the complexity of understanding state behavior in contemporary geopolitics, where actions are often the result of a nuanced blend of fear, honor, and interest. Thucydides' ancient framework, with its emphasis on these three motivations, remains remarkably relevant in shedding light on the intricate dynamics at play, offering valuable insights into the motivations driving Russia's strategic decisions in the ongoing conflict.

4. Analysis of Ukraine's Action

Ukraine is mostly the responsive, passive party in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. As a result, fear becomes a major element for Ukraine, mostly due to challenges to its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Roznai and Suteu, 2015). The state of Ukraine faces existential dangers as a result of Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea and its continued support of separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine. This anxiety is related to potential future incursions that could jeopardize Ukraine's independence in addition to the loss of territory. This fear has driven Ukraine to pursue closer connections with Western organizations like the European Union and NATO in an effort to fortify its security by aligning with potent allies (Wolff, 2015).

This mindset was made clear after the events in Crimea in 2014, and it became much more apparent

during military actions in 2022 and the ensuing annexation of four Eastern Ukrainian provinces. Ukraine has suffered greatly since these provinces were occupied in 2022, both in terms of lost territory and the sharp escalation of concerns about its independence and national sovereignty (Musa and Shehaj, 2023). The events have had a practical and psychological impact that has made Ukraine's situation more dire and forced it to adopt a defensive stance. This increased level of terror has not only confirmed Ukraine's security concerns but has also made a reactive response to the military operation necessary. Therefore, it is possible to view Ukraine's actions as reflex reactions to lessen the current threats posed by Russian expansionism and to protect its future as a sovereign nation, motivated by fear and the need to maintain its statehood.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's reaction to the Russian invasion is heavily influenced by honor. Ukraine's quest for honor is obvious in its resolve to fend off Russian influence and preserve its geographical integrity as a country working to affirm its identity and sovereignty. The pursuit of honor is linked to the aspiration to be acknowledged globally as an autonomous and self-governing nation, liberated from the sway of Russian authority (Roznai and Suteu, 2015). Ukraine's desire to preserve its pride and dignity in the face of external dangers is reflected in its resistance to Russian military actions and its pursuit of deeper ties with the EU and NATO. Furthermore, this feeling has further sparked a renewed nationalist movement among Ukrainians, who are emboldened by Russia's foreign threat (Musa and Shehaj, 2023). A strong mobilizing factor, the heightened sense of national unity and identity, has united the populace to defend their homeland and cultural heritage. This rise in nationalism strengthens Ukraine's will to fend against outside threats as well as the country's overall commitment to ensure Ukraine's continued existence as an independent and sovereign state.

Ukraine acts also in the interest of its economy and strategy. In addition to rejecting Russian influence, the nation is embracing the benefits of tighter economic, political, and security links with Western institutions through its European integration ambitions. Ukraine wants to secure its borders, bolster its democratic institutions, and restructure its economy. These goals are all part of a larger strategic plan to ensure the country's survival and prosperity in a volatile region (Babenko et al., 2020). However, such a one-sided strategy has worsened the Ukrainian state's problems, particularly the drive to join NATO in defiance of Russian resistance. Due to these acts, which had a major negative effect on Russia's interests, Russia launched an aggressive campaign against the four Eastern Ukrainian regions (Musa and Shehaj, 2023). Thus, maintaining territorial integrity and national sovereignty—which are also essential to a state's basic interests—remains Ukraine's most urgent necessity.

Fear also seems to be the primary motivator underlying Ukraine's actions during the conflict, as the preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity is inevitably accompanied by a fear-based worldview. Russia's military operation poses a direct and physical threat. Thus, a reaction focused on survival and statehood preservation is required. Ukraine has shifted its focus toward the West since 2014, seeking not just military support but also economic aid and political backing to offset Russian influence because of its concern about losing further land and sovereignty to Russian expansionism (Roznai and Suteu, 2015). Fear has been a potent reforming force in Ukraine, driving the nation toward greater Western structural integration as a safeguard for its continued existence as an independent and sovereign state.

Applying Thucydides' framework to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict from the Ukrainian point of view, one finds a state motivated by the need to protect itself from external invasion. The interaction of honor, interest, and terror captures the complex reasons for Ukraine's strategic decisions and highlights the significant influence of existential risks on the course of national policy. The acts of Ukraine demonstrate the continued significance of Thucydides' analysis in comprehending the dynamics of contemporary geopolitical conflicts, as they are motivated by the pressing desire to protect their independence and territorial integrity.

5. Analysis of European And American Involvement

Analyzing the role played by European nations and the United States is essential, even looking beyond the two primary participants. In the first place, it offers perceptions of the strategic goals and intentions guiding Western policies and deeds, which are essential for comprehending the more comprehensive dynamics of international relations. The West's approach to the conflict demonstrates its commitment to upholding democratic principles and the post-Cold War international order, in addition to reflecting its views on territorial integrity and international law (Kortunov, 2023). Secondly, by emphasizing the influence of alliances like NATO and the European Union in determining geopolitical outcomes, such an approach illuminates the workings of collective Western response in the face of “aggression” (Lane, 2016). Comprehending the conduct of Western countries facilitates the interpretation of power dynamics and evolving trends in international politics, providing an outlook on possible future developments and the progression of the international security framework. Finally, analyzing the West's actions in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict highlights the significance of diplomatic, economic, and military tools in managing and possibly resolving geopolitical crises (Kortunov, 2023). This helps to advance our understanding of conflict resolution techniques and the goal of achieving global stability.

The way that the United States and other Western nations responded to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be understood in light of Thucydides' theoretical framework, which reveals their profound agreement with these age-old goals. The analysis that follows will focus on how the West's strategic stance toward Russia and Ukraine is shaped by fear, honor, and interest, emphasizing the significant influence these factors have on the dynamics of international relations and conflict resolution.

Fear is a big factor for the US and other Western nations, mostly because of the possibility of Russian expansionism and the instability of the European security framework. Russia's participation in Eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea have increased concerns about a potential larger Russian strategy to threaten the post-Cold War international order and erode European unity (Kortunov, 2023). This concern encompasses more than just territorial aggression; it also includes the weakening of democratic institutions and the expansion of authoritarian power. The need to prevent additional Russian military operations and preserve the integrity of the European security environment is what motivates the West's response, which includes sanctions against Russia and backing for the military and economic stability of Ukraine (Big-Alabo and MacAlex-Achinulo, 2022). It is significant that this anxiety has persisted to some degree since the advent of Imperial Russia and is not limited to the modern international system. Russia shares borders with several member states of the European Union and NATO, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe like Poland and the Baltic States, where there has historically been some “Russophobia.”

In the context of the United States and other Western nations, honor is entwined with the dedication to respecting international law as well as the ideas of sovereignty and territorial integrity. According to Muoneke and Nnani (2023), the West's position in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is also about upholding the standards that have guided interactions between nations ever since the Second World War and the honor of the international community. This entails opposing forceful, unilateral territorial claims and supporting an international system based on laws (Muoneke and Nnani, 2023). The West's actions, including its diplomatic attempts to isolate Russia and mobilize global censure, are indicative of a desire to uphold the integrity and legitimacy of the international system and its institutions.

Furthermore, the interests of the United States and Western nations are complex, combining strategic, economic, and security aspects. It is strategically advantageous to limit Russian influence in Eastern Europe in order to preserve regional stability and stop NATO's eastern flank from eroding (Cadier, 2019). The West is supporting Ukraine in order to maintain commercial links and energy security because the conflict puts trade routes and energy supplies in danger (Babenko et al. 2020). Moreover, aiding Ukraine is consistent with the larger goal of advancing democracy and thwarting authoritarian inclinations, bolstering the West's position and power internationally (Wolff, 2015).

Interest and the pursuit of honor in upholding international law are inherently intertwined. Thus, they emerged as the principal motivations behind the activities of European countries and the United States

in the conflict. This composite motivation reflects a nuanced approach that not only aims at preserving regional stability and the broader international order but also at defending the principles of international law and democratic values. In this context, restraining Russian military operations and preventing its expansion into Eastern Europe serve not only strategic interests but also embody a commitment to uphold the honor of international legal norms and the rule of law. The defense of democratic values, along with addressing financial needs related to trade relations and energy security, underscores the multifaceted nature of these motivations (Cadier, 2019). Consequently, the West's engagement, exemplified by sanctions, military support, and diplomatic efforts, signifies a coordinated response that aims to protect the integrity of international law and democratic principles while simultaneously securing strategic objectives (Cadier, 2019). This response effectively marries the pursuit of interest with the commitment to honor international law, highlighting the complex motivations driving European countries and the United States in their support of Ukraine against Russian advances, thereby reinforcing the security architecture of Europe and asserting the standing and influence of Western institutions and values on the global stage.

6. Conclusion

Through the Thucydidean lenses of honor, fear, and interest—which emphasize the fundamental motivations driving the actions of Russia, Ukraine, and the collective West, including the United States—this essay demonstrates a nuanced perspective of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The comparative research highlights the intricacies and disparities in the incentives driving state conduct in the modern geopolitical environment.

Russia's actions blend with narratives of historical and cultural kinship to justify its conduct when its main motivations are understood as the pursuit of honor and interest, intended to reaffirm its status as a great power while protecting its geopolitical interests against the backdrop of Ukraine's westward orientation. On the other hand, fear-based existential threats to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity are the main reasons for its actions. A return to nationalism and a strategic shift towards the West in search of security assurances and backing against Russian military operations are the results of this anxiety.

The West's response demonstrates a commitment to democratic values and a rules-based international system. It was motivated by fear of Russian expansionism, honor in upholding international law, and strategic interests in maintaining regional peace. The three parties' underlying reasons may vary, but they all show how fear, honor, and interest interact intricately to shape the dynamics of the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine.

The consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict go beyond borders, forcing the international community to reconsider the tenets of world stability and order. Applying Thucydides' theory to this conflict clarifies the importance of strategic calculations in modern geopolitics and improves our understanding of the motivations behind state behavior. The conflict serves as a reminder of the value of upholding the rule of law, the balance of power, and the necessity of strong international institutions to handle and maybe settle such conflicts.

However, there are also drawbacks to applying Thucydides' theory to modern conflicts, which are frequently marked by complex issues that go beyond the purview of conventional statecraft. Thucydides' paradigm does not immediately address the non-state actors, cyber warfare, and information campaigns that characterize modern conflicts (Crane, 2023). A more comprehensive analytical approach is also necessary due to the additional layers of complexity brought about by the globalized structure of today's world, including its interwoven economic dependencies and the function of international organizations (Lebow, 2012).

It is necessary for future studies to broaden the analytical framework to encompass these contemporary aspects of conflict, maybe incorporating knowledge from international law, economics, and cybersecurity. More research on how non-state actors and international institutions fit into Thucydides' paradigm could lead to a more thorough understanding of today's geopolitical disputes. The continuing significance of Thucydides' theory in understanding contemporary international

relations is emphasized in this paper, along with the need for its adaptation to consider the intricacies of the modern, globalized world.

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