

Review of: "Russian Military Renaissance: An Unnecessary War"

Ion Marandici¹

¹ Rutgers University

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The paper is highly relevant and timely as most international relations scholars pay attention to the Russian war against Ukraine, attempting to understand the logic behind it. Still, the author's ambition to tackle multiple dimensions of the war in the same paper resulted in the absence of a crisp argument. One can discern the contours of the main argument, but it is not entirely clear what is the research question that the author tries to answer. Having a clearly stated research question is important as it requires a thorough literature review, the formulation of potential answers (i.e. research hypotheses), the construction of a research design as well as the testing of alternative theoretical assumptions.

In brief, the author seems to propose the following causal story. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not an instance of realist foreign policy, because realists are rational, whereas Putin's use of nuclear threats throughout the war is irrational. A truly rational actor would favor self-preservation rather than Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Next, Putin's behavior marked by lack of rationality is linked to the mysticism embedded in the Neo-Eurasian geopolitical paradigm backed by Alexander Dugin, whose ideas are presumed to have influenced the Russian strategic thinking and produced "a military renaissance." The author circles back to the question of rationality several times throughout the paper. For instance, in a subsequent section one reads that "although rational in his intentions and struggle for self-defence against the enlargement of NATO, Putin is reckless in his behavior" and displays "wishful thinking or non-rational perceptions." When discussing the potential use of nuclear weapons by Russia, Ivanov observes that influenced by Neo-Eurasianism, Putin may view a united West as an existential threat and may reach "the ultimate conclusion that nuclear weapons are the only credible deterrent to Russia's adversaries."

Taking the summary in the previous paragraph as a starting point, I will comment here mostly on the rationality question and add a couple of comments about NATO and Neo-Eurasianism.

First, the terms rational/irrational could be used in a better way. I suggest that the author defines rationality. Is thinking about the means necessary to achieve one's ends a sign of rational calculations? Or is it individual utility (i.e. power, security, status) maximization? Or, perhaps, the author wishes to apply the concept of bounded rationality popular in social sciences? There is a vast literature on rational choice in international relations and foreign policy analysis, which could be invoked here. But there also theoretical accounts relying on alternative models of decision-making. See, for instance, the bureaucratic politics model proposed by Allison and Zelikow (1999).

There is then the problem of reckless behavior which Ivanov connects to irrational behavior. In my view, reckless behavior

in international relations refers to orientations toward risk. Reckless means that someone accepts too much risk (i.e. risk-acceptant), which is not the same as behaving irrationally. Accepting more risk when one has incomplete information about the strategic environment can be the result of rational behavior. In other words, miscalculations happen all the time in global affairs, but that's not irrational behavior. By contrast when someone rejects risk, one talks about risk aversion.

My suggestion would be for the author to adopt prospect theory as an explanatory framework and work from within that paradigm. In an article published in the *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* (October 2022), I described how Putin's orientations toward risk-taking have evolved during the 2013-2014 period, leading to the decision to annex Crimea rather than transform it into a secessionist republic akin to Transnistria or the Donetsk People's Republic. My article "Loss Aversion, Neo-imperial Frames and Territorial Expansion: Using Prospect Theory to Examine the Annexation of Crimea" argued in favor of using prospect theory as a baseline explanatory framework for decision-making in conflict situations marked by risk and uncertainty. Prospect theory incorporates rationality and demonstrates that when individuals (in this case political leaders) face losses in reference to an existing status quo they are willing to accept more risk.

Besides loss aversion and the constant comparison to a reference point, the importance of framing is another phenomenon that prospect theory elucidates. Decisions of otherwise rational individuals are influenced by the way a problem is framed (i.e. as a loss or as a gain). Applying the same logic to Putin's decision-making, one observes that he and his entourage constantly frame Ukraine governed by pro-EU elites and democratizing as a loss, which then leads to risky behavior including hybrid warfare and conventional war-making. Note that the potential for Russia to rely on hybrid warfare in Ukraine diminished significantly after authorities detained the leader of the main pro-Russian party, banned similar parties, and limited the impact of the Russian state-owned media in the country.

Adopting prospect theory will help the author explain Putin's nuclear posturing. The use of nuclear threats is not something new. It happened before in 2014-2015 and Putin's main goal back then was to elicit a Western response. It is important to realize that nuclear posturing can be used strategically and is not a sign of irrational behavior. Sometimes the madman theory serves well the "madman." It may be advantageous to generate the perception that Russia's leader is a madman and behaves erratically when his demands are not met. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that Putin's nuclear threats aim to persuade the opponent to begin peace negotiations and, later, to extract concessions during peace talks.

If the author disagrees with the premises of prospect theory and insists on demonstrating the lack of rational behavior, he could look at identity-related theories (for instance constructivism) and some psychological dimensions of decision-making such as, for instance, the impact of emotions and affect.

My second point is related to NATO's enlargement. Despite Russian claims to the contrary, this war is not primarily about NATO. Ukraine was not on the path to join NATO as the organization did not signal that it would accept Kyiv as a member. Instead, Ukraine was a NATO partner. It is, however, true that the accession to NATO has been declared a national priority before the invasion. Still, in March 2022, as the Ukrainians and Russians were holding peace talks in Istanbul, Zelenskyy expressed his willingness to abandon the idea of joining NATO in order to achieve peace. In other

words, if the war would have been exclusively about Russia's dissatisfaction with NATO's plans to accept new members, Russia should have ended the invasion once Kyiv offered to remain a neutral country outside NATO.

My third comment is linked to the second one. The author is right in examining the impact of ideas on policymaking. Specifically, the situation in Ukraine was framed in a neo-imperial fashion due to the prevailing set of beliefs and ideas shared by Putin and his closest advisers. However, I would look beyond Neo-Eurasianism and consult Putin's historical essay from 2021 as well as other ideological influences. This would help us understand how the problem was framed by Putin, who, in essence, decided to invade Ukraine.

To help the author identify the relevant literature on rational choice theory and prospect theory in international relations and foreign policy analysis, I have added below some articles, which the author may find useful. As a previous reviewer has mentioned, the paper can be reorganized, but the author would need to narrow its scope, adopt a theoretical framework, formulate a clear argument and then stick to it throughout the paper.

Good luck on revising this draft.

References

- Allison, G. T. and Zelikow, P. (1999) *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* Reading, MA: Longman.
- Bukkvoll, T. (2016) "Why Putin Went to War: Ideology, Interests and Decision-Making in the Russian Use of Force in Crimea and Donbas," *Contemporary Politics* 22(3): 267–82. doi:10.1080/13569775.2016.1201310.
- Farnham, B. (1992) "Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis: Insights from Prospect Theory," *Political Psychology* 13(2): 205–35. doi:10.2307/3791679.
- Fearon, J. D. (1995) "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49(3): 379–414.
- Gorenburg, D. (2019) "Russian Strategic Culture in a Baltic Crisis," *Security Insights* 25, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.
- Kuzio, T. and D'Anieri, P. (2018) *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics* Bristol: E-International Relations.
- Levy, J. (1997) "Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 41(1): 87–112.
- Marandici, I. (2022) "Loss Aversion, Neo-Imperial Frames, and Territorial Expansion: Using Prospect Theory to Examine the Annexation of Crimea," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 111-147.
- Marandici, I. (2022) "The Perils of Biased Power Mediation: Insights from the Secessionist Conflicts in Moldova and Ukraine." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 1 (2022): 10-16. doi:10.1353/gia.2022.0003.
- Marandici, I. (2023) "Structural bias, polarized mediation and conflict resolution failure: a comparative examination of the disputes in Transnistria and Donbas," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 23:1, 89-

113, DOI: [10.1080/14683857.2022.2101188](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2101188)

Marten, K. (2015) "Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine," *The Washington Quarterly* 38(2): 189–204.

McDermott, R. (1992) "Prospect Theory in International Relations: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission," *Political Psychology* 13(2): 237–63. doi:10.2307/3791680.

McDermott, R. (2004) "Prospect Theory in Political Science: Gains and Losses from the First Decade," *Political Psychology* 25: 289–312. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00372.x.