This paper examines three major theoretical frameworks to explain Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine. It is argued that although the war caught many by surprise, it can still be explained by at least several International Relations theories. President Putin’s decision may be erroneous but it should be treated as rational.

The purpose of this research is to suggest theoretical frameworks suitable for understanding and evaluating the key foreign policy and security decisions taken by the current Russian leadership. It is assumed that the moves and choices taken by the Kremlin, in particular on the eve of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, resulted from the way decision-makers had perceived the threats and options of the time. It is also assumed that International Relations as a scientific discipline has relevant explanations and frameworks for dealing even with such seemingly irrational decisions like the one taken before the invasion. Political leaders are not going mad; they rather act within specific environments framed by available information and some basic theoretical assumptions.

This article focuses on examining Russia’s invasion of Ukraine through the lenses of security dilemma, rational decision-making and power transition process. The author argues that each of these approaches can provide a coherent explanation of a strategic logic behind the decision to wage war. Moreover, by using each of these instruments it may be possible to assess Russia’s foreign and security policy beyond its Ukrainian direction, and also in a retrospect.

An interstate war in a modern world is assumed to bear extremely high costs and generate high risks. Because of that, wars are so rare. But this does not imply that wars are impossible. At different levels and under certain conditions, launching a war may still seem to be the best course of action, in particular for revisionist states, even if it a choice between the bad and the worst.

Keywords: security dilemma, Russian invasion of Ukraine, power transition theory, rational choice.
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ЧОМУ РОСІЯ НАПАЛА НА УКРАЇНУ? МОЖЛИВІ ТЕОРЕТИЧНІ ПОЯСНЕННЯ

У цій статті висвітлено три основні теоретичні засади, звернувшись до яких можна пояснити рішення Росії про напад на Україну. Висунуто гіпотезу про те, що війну, яка стала несподіваною для багатьох, все одно можна пояснити за допомогою прийнятих різних теорій міжнародних відносин. Рішення президента Путіна, ймовірно, було помилковим, але воно не було ірраціональним. Мета дослідження – запропонувати теоретичні підходи, які би були прийнятними для розуміння та оцінювання ключових рішення у сфері зовнішніх політичних і безпеки, котрі ухвалило керівництво Росії. Висунуто гіпотезу про те, що дії військових рішення Кремля, зокрема напередодні широкомасштабного вторгнення в Україну, визначали не лише військово-політичні, але і політичні критерії. Також висунуто гіпотезу про те, що міжнародні відносини як наука дисципліна можуть надати адекватні пояснення та інструменти навіть для того, щоб дослідити рішення, котрі здаються ірраціональними, наприклад, що були прийняті перед військовими акціями. Політичні лідери не втрачають розуму, скоріше, вони діють у специфічному середовищі, сформованому наявною інформацією та деякими базовими теоретичними уявленнями.

У статті російське воєнне вторгнення в Україну розглядається з кількох точок зору: як дилема безпеки, раціональна модель прийняття зовнішньополітичних рішень та процес перетікання силових ресурсів. Продемонстровано, що кожен з них надає адекватні пояснення стратегічні логіки рішення про війні. Крім того, застосування кожного з них інструментів надає змогу оцінити зовнішню та безпекову політику Росії і поза її українським напрямом, а також у ретроспективі.

Вважається, що міждержавні війни в сучасному світі вимагають величезних витрат та несуть високі ризики. Саме тому війни настільки рідкісні, але це не означає, що вони є неможливими. На окремих рівнях та за певних умов почати війну може все ще здаватися найкращим виходом, зокрема для ревізіоністських держав, навіть якщо це вибір між поганим та найгіршим.

Ключові слова: дилема безпеки, російське вторгнення в Україну, теорія перетікання силових ресурсів, раціональний вибір.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine caught many by surprise and has put international relations (IR) theory to the test. For decades it has been assumed within various IR paradigms and approaches that a conventional war is too expensive in a modern world. The fact that wars did occur from time to time did not prove such assumptions wrong: interstate wars in a 20th-century fashion have been exceptionally rare in recent decades.

In the specific case of Russia's invasion, it was not only a matter of expense, but also high risk. Although Ukraine is not a NATO member and no security guarantees had been formally extended to it, the Russian leadership could have expected significant international (in particular, Western) assistance in response. The military campaign, as it often happens in asymmetric wars, might have gone wrong. The reaction of public opinion in Russia was hard to control fully. To put it short, a conventional war against a country of Ukraine’s size was too difficult to imagine.

When, nevertheless, it happened, a number of conventional wisdoms about modern international politics were thrown away. It has been even assumed that IR theory has little to offer to explain what happened, not to mention predict. The influence and authority of the discipline faltered.

That was to no purpose. No matter how many IR theorists were wrong in predicting these particular developments, the major paradigms still offer sound and reasonable explanations of the war. This paper is focused on examining three of them.
IR theorists have often been wrong in seeing the future. IR is rather a normative and explanatory than predictive discipline. After all, decision-makers are not necessarily guided by specific paradigms, may have deteriorated values and preferences, or may act irrationally. But still there are several analytical instruments which can help understand why the Russian leadership took the decision to invade – and under what circumstances other states' leaders may follow in their footsteps.

1. Security Dilemma

One of the concepts almost immediately coming to mind while listening to Russia's leadership's prewar rhetoric is security dilemma [1, p. 167–170; 2]. This is a strategic puzzle faced by decision-makers in which a high level of uncertainty coupled with worst-case scenario thinking create a strong incentive for preventive attack.

Security dilemma is one of the most instrumental concepts within realism. It assumes that survival is the utmost goal of a state, which, in turn, is a principal actor in international politics. Survival requires accurate management of the balance of power, in particular with the view not to allow stronger coalitions to emerge or for a state to be left against a stronger opponent. But managing the balance of power in this manner generates insecurity for others, who can't be absolutely sure about the intentions of the managing state. Since realism advises to pay attention to power potentials rather than to the intentions or promises of others, someone's growing power is always a matter of concern [3]. Numerous wars started because of security dilemma. Its paradox is at the heart of realism: by aiming at maximizing their security, states are often treated as threats and find themselves engaged into wars.

Trapped in a security dilemma, decision-makers find it difficult to assess the intentions of others. They can only measure power potentials. From an offensive realist perspective, assuming the worst is the best strategy [4]. That leads to constant fear and suspicion, which get stronger if parties, like in the case with Russia and Ukraine, have a previous record of hostilities and unresolved territorial disputes.

Uncertainty about intentions and fear of the worst make states perceive neighbors as enemies. Relations with them start to look as zero-sum games, in which the win of one is only possible due to the loss by the other. In such interactions any advantage is crucial; and it is important to make use of it before it's gone.

A classical example of the impact of security dilemma of decision-making is the onset of the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens in Ancient Greece. Sparta, the strongest state in the system, was facing the rise of Athens' might. There was neither necessity for a war, nor a threat issued by Athens to Sparta. But the problem was in dynamics: for Spartans it seemed that Athens is getting more powerful over time than themselves; and that was a threat in itself.

Time matters, since it shifts power balance and redistributes advantages. It may also provide justification for a decision to launch a war to those, who seek relative supremacy above all. Spartans were stronger than Athenians (at least they thought they were), but over time that balance was about to change. Since states cannot control the behavior of others, they also lack credible security guarantees. At some point the best response to the growing relative power of Athens was to launch a war while the advantage was still of Sparta's side.

That has much to do with the anarchy of international politics. The absence of anything like a government implies the lack of rules and restrictions. That, in turn, results in high uncertainty about everything, hence the incentive for preventive moves [5].

Security dilemma creates a powerful logic leading to a war those who are afraid of losing control. For them the best way to diminish uncertainty is enforcement and expansion. They go to war not so much to conquer the others, but to ensure they won't become a threat in the future. And that logic fits well with the strategic culture of Russia, a country which has so far the most impressive record of territorial expansion.

On February, 21st, 2022, three days before the invasion, Russian president Vladimir Putin issued a long address, explaining his assessment of events in and around Ukraine [6]. Along with a detailed and lengthy part devoted to his interpretation of history, it contained some strategic considerations, namely about US involvement, nuclear weapons and NATO. Taken together, they may be seen as a perceived security dilemma.

Putin's argument was built around Ukraine's growing military capability and closeness to the West. Both have been seen and presented as a threat to Russia. Following the logic of the Russian president, the Western engagement in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has been going on since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, was getting stronger. With increased Western support, Ukraine could have changed the balance of power with Russia in the future – and things might have gone out of Moscow's control.
The security dilemma mechanism leaves little choice in a situation like this. By attaching such a high importance to Russia’s security to anything Ukraine was doing, president Putin made himself surrounded by threats, either real or perceived. Generally speaking, a war is not unavoidable even under such circumstances. But the problem was in sustainability and trust to any possible agreements. They were lacking.

A critical advantage Moscow possessed before the invasion was absence of security guarantees for Ukraine from the West. The country continued to reside in the grey zone of security in Europe having no allies and no protection. That made Ukraine vulnerable to Russia; but from Putin’s point of view, that also could have changed. While mentioning possible Ukraine’s membership in NATO, he noticed, that it is not going to happen tomorrow, but how about a day after tomorrow? That’s a clear indication of Putin’s perception of time working against Russia’s interests. Ukraine’s possible membership in NATO, following a long Russian tradition, has been labeled a direct threat to Russia’s security [6].

Same uncertainty and even fear about the future may be seen in Putin's reflections about the possible acquisition of nuclear weapons by Ukraine. A prospect even more distant and unrealistic for Ukraine than joining NATO, it nevertheless has been referred to. In Putin’s view, it will be relatively easy for Ukraine to go nuclear, and weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine would radically change the situation for Russia.

By seeking to avoid vulnerability in the future, Putin opted for a war in the present, with all its risks and uncertainties. That’s how security dilemma operates. From the Russian president’s perspective the future looked too dangerous if things are left unchanged. His own previous decisions have left too little room for a sustainable agreement. All elements of a security dilemma – lack of trust, uncertainty, and a perceived threat – were brought together.

Time is another important element in the logic of a security dilemma; and Putin has been referring to it, presumably in terms of it working against Russia. His reckless decision to attack may be explained by the rationale of the security dilemma, in which a war becomes a possible and even rational option, given that the chances for success are never going to be higher. No matter how low they are.

2. Rational Choice

Wars are always about decision-making. There might be plentiful of reasons for states to fight at systemic, regional, bilateral or national levels. But there is always a personal level, at which political leaders have to make a final choice, in particular to opt for a war. No matter how inconsistent the interests of states may be or how long-term trends may increase the likelihood of a violent conflict, a war is always a result of a personal decision.

It has been occasionally assumed that Russia’s decision to launch a war against Ukraine has been irrational, just like is has also been stated in 2014 that a decision to annex Crimea from Ukraine has been out of touch with reality1. However, political leaders are not only in touch with reality, but they actively create and transform it with their decisions. The annexation of Crimea opened up a new reality in international politics, and that may have been resulting from quite rational calculations.

From the perspective of rational choice theory, the "rationality" of a state implies perceiving it as a unitary actor capable of ordering preferences and choosing the best strategy to maximize gains.

That means that "irrationality" may turn to be just another way of ordering preferences; the same is true about a lost touch with reality. Finally, a decision to go to war may be erroneous, but that does not mean that it was irrational. What kind of decision was taken by Vladimir Putin from the perspective of rational choice theory?

To decide whether to attack Ukraine or not, Putin had to make some calculations, approximately described by the following formula:

$$U(w) = p_w(V) - (1 - p_w)(L) - c,$$

where

- $U(w)$ – expected utility of launching a war,
- $p_w$ – probability of winning,
- $V$ – value of prize,
- $L$ – cost of a loss,
- $C$ – war expenses.

Rational choice theory is about taking decisions with a positive expected value. If the expected utility of a war was assessed as positive, then the decision to invade had been rational. This could have been possible if the Russian leadership was counting on high chances for a victory; thus, pursuing a highly valuable prize and assessing war expenses

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1 German Chancellor Angela Merkel was reported to say she was not sure Putin was in touch with reality in a phone call to US President Barack Obama on March, 2nd, 2014, see Ukraine Crisis: Vladimir Putin has lost the plot, says German chancellor. (2014, March 3). Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/03/ukraine-vladimir-putin-angela-merkel-russian
as tolerable. An extremely high value for either a probability of winning or a prize, given a low value of expenses, also would have been enough to make expected utility acceptable.

There are several important reservations to be made. First, the rational actor model implies a single unitary decision-maker, which is rarely the case, since there is always an organizational context [7]. Second, group dynamics should also be taken into account, since a small group consisting of rational members may diverge from rational decision due to group-thinking or other syndromes [8]. Third, assessing each of the parameters may be quite problematic. The latter might have been a crucial difficulty for the Russian leadership within rational choice approach to the issue of war with Ukraine.

The least problematic might have been assessing the prize value. A victorious war could have provided Russia with control over Ukraine in one way or another. The "prize" comprised political, financial and geostrategic gains. From a political perspective, a successful war against Ukraine could have given the ruling political regime in Russia extended credibility and popular support, securing the prolongation of Putin’s stay in power and preserving the regime after he has gone. Economically, Ukraine is a valuable asset for Russian energy and industry as well as a big market. From a geostrategic perspective, the importance of Ukraine to Russia is probably the largest. In his address to the Federal Assembly of Russia in 2005, President Putin stated that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical disaster of the century [9]. Zbigniew Brzezinski noted that without Ukraine Russia ceases to be an empire [10]. These are only a few of multiple views on how important it is for Russia’s global ambitions to have considerable influence on Ukraine.

It is impossible to say whether Russia’s great power status is indispensable from controlling Ukraine. After all, power in current international politics is mostly correlating with large and dynamic economy, not with control over specific territories. But in a mindset of the Russian leadership the value of controlling territories in general and Ukraine in particular appears to be exaggerated. Thus, they must be really placing extremely high value on a prospect of a victorious war against Ukraine.

There is also another dimension to measuring the "prize" of a victory over Ukraine, the one created by the security dilemma. If a standoff against the West is assumed to be a zero-sum game, then controlling Ukraine is important in order not to let it align with the West, Russia’s geopolitical adversary. All those arguments may have contributed to the fairly high importance Russian leadership attached to control over Ukraine.

The calculation of probabilities was more challenging. It has been evident that Russia is a far more powerful state than Ukraine. But how would that translate into chances of winning a war?

There were at least two ways to approach the task. First, attention could have been paid to a recent record of conflicts between the two states. That could provide the Russian decision-makers with some reasons for optimism: in 2014 it took relatively little effort for Russia to annex Crimea from Ukraine in a hybrid military operation. The subsequent eight years of low intensity military conflict in Donbas in Eastern Ukraine saw at least two direct military interventions by Russian troops, resulting in defeats of the Ukrainian army at Ilovaysk in 2014 and Debaltseve in 2015. Second, the overall balance of forces could have been assessed on the basis of military expenditures and overall military capacity. Russia’s military expenditure in 2021 totaled almost $66 billion, while Ukraine’s was about ten times lower at $5.9 billion [11]. Russia enjoyed overwhelming superiority in military equipment and is the largest nuclear power in the world. In recent years a vast program of military modernization has been carried out in Russia. It was hardly a major mistake to estimate Russia’s military advantage over Ukraine at about a one to ten ratio.

On the basis of these assessments the Russian leadership could have expected high probability of winning a war against Ukraine. However, it also should have taken into account at least two factors: foreign military aid to Ukraine and the asymmetric character of the war. Along with material advantages, asymmetric war should have provided Russia with additional risks connected to fighting a war of conquest against a large country with a highly motivated population. Most likely, Russian strategists did take that into account, but still significantly overestimated the chances for a rapid victory.

The costs of war might have been, on the contrary, underestimated. They comprised not only the financial and material losses of a large-scale military campaign. Considerable impact might have been expected from the sanctions, which have already been in place since 2014 and were going to be drastically severed in case of invasion. The current effect of sanctions is estimated by the EU to drop Russia’s GPD by 11% by the end of 2022, to cut Russia foreign trade by about 30% and to raise inflation to 22%.

One of the key problems with the sanctions, however, was the difficulty in measuring their impact on the Russian economy before the war. It might have seemed that Moscow had found ways to minimize losses and generally tolerated the targeted sanctions that had been introduced against specific sectors of Russia’s economy back in 2014. Thus, a simple projection of the previous experience coupled with years of accumulating reserves could have persuaded Moscow that the price of sanctions would not be intolerable.
Along with the immediate and long-term effects of sanctions there have been political and geopolitical elements of the price as well. Even a successful war might have carried unexpected risks for Putin’s political regime, not to mention a not-so-successful war. In addition, there was an international dimension of the decision to invade. First, Russia revealed its real military capability and its limits, thus significantly weakening its image as a military superpower. Second, by opting to invade a neighboring country, it has worsened its image internationally, making lots of enemies and no new friends. All those risks and costs should have been taken into account but could have been underestimated.

Taken together, mistakes in calculating probabilities of victory, costs of war and the value of a win/loss, might have shifted the value of expected utility of a war. Thus, a decision by the Russian leadership to invade Ukraine can be explained within the rational choice approach, as a way to maximize gains at appropriate costs – but which was badly calculated.

3. Power Transition

At a global level of the struggle for power, the war between Russia and Ukraine can be explained through the lenses of power transition theory.

The theory assumes that the international security system deteriorates when a rising challenger closes the gap on the existing hegemon, either individual or collective / cluster. A crisis of hegemony is the most dangerous stance of the world order, and it tends to generate a series of regional clashes, which may end up in a global conflict.

There are several factors generating such instability. First, the crisis of the hegemony implies the crisis of the world order, which was once created and sustained by a hegemon [12]. Inter alia, that means that usual rules and norms are not functional anymore; and once-effective mechanisms of deterrence erode. The world order within such approach may be viewed as a way to limit the destabilizing impact of anarchy on relations among states. If anarchy is a permissive cause of war, then erosion of the world order undermines international security.

Second, a rising challenger may find it difficult to precisely calculate the balance of power and assess his chances to win in a direct conflict with a declining hegemon. His expanding power projection capabilities and resources may enhance readiness to put the existing world order to the test. Excessive optimism may result in mistaken decisions based on erroneous assessment of the balance of power.

Third, a declining hegemon may be assuming that time plays against him, and thus it may be better to launch a preventive conflict while chances for a victory are still high and allies are still on his side.

The balance between status quo powers and challengers is dynamic. Existing agreements and regimes do not always change in accordance to changes in the balance of power. That leads to a growing conflict potential. When these factors are in play, regional conflicts tend to increase in number and intensity. A hegemon is increasingly unable to function as a world policeman, while norms of world order are weakening. As soon as things start to deteriorate, the speed of the process increases as a number of hesitant countries grows. Since usual patterns of regional rivalry change, the level of uncertainty grows as well as the level of mistrust, and conflicts are more likely to escalate. International institutions do not play their usual role, effective mediation disappears – and conflicts tend to become more violent.

They also become more important as the whole of international politics turns into a zero-sum game. A loss in a particular regional conflict may shift the balance on the global level, which is why conflicts are becoming tenser, while parties are getting less prepared to back down.

From a power transition theory perspective, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a part of a challenge to the existing world order and can’t be evaluated outside the global context. This context is primarily shaped by the rise of China, the crisis of American leadership and the structural transformations of international politics.

Chinese global political ambitions are primarily enabled by decades of steady economic rise. China is the largest economy in the world: its GDP by purchasing power parity exceeded that of the US by about 17 % in 2020. China is also an emerging military superpower with rising projecting capabilities and nuclear weapons. Its initiative “One Belt, One Road” aims at enhancing China’s global presence, strengthen its political leverage in dozens of countries and, in the end, to suggest new frames and patterns of coexistence and cooperation.

Along with material manifestations of China’s rise, there is also a political vision behind it. China aims at a revision of the international order, which is believed to be too Western-centered and functioning to the benefit of the West at the expense of the Third World countries. Thus, China, both ideologically and structurally, may be seen as a rising challenger to the Western hegemony.

If China is a rising challenger to existing world order, one should notice that a gap is still large. Its economy is still a developing one. The share of industry in GDP is about 40 %, while its annual GDP per capita is just about $10,000. Chinese military expenditures are three times lower than
those of the US, not to mention accumulated American military potential. The US army is smaller than that of China, but it is far better technologically – in particular in what concerns aircraft carriers, fifth generation fighters, and missile technologies. The US is also far ahead in logistical, infrastructural and power-projecting capabilities. Along with material advantages, the US is also superior to China in soft power, structural power, and alliances – traditional benefits of a hegemon.

From the perspective of a power transition theory, China might be interested in probing the credibility of the US alliances and building alliances of its own. It is also important that Russia is the only other revisionist great power, thus bilateral Chinese-Russian relations "without borders" are especially important for Beijing.

From the power transition theory perspective, the Russian-Ukrainian war is a systematic challenge to the current world order. It is a conflict that involves not only Russia and Ukraine; and the bets also go far beyond Russia's and Ukraine's interests. It is a test of the existing balance of power of the states willing to change the rules of the game and those willing to protect them. From this perspective, the breakout of the war was not a matter of Russia's perceived security dilemma or decision-making process; but the result of the dynamic global power equilibrium.

Conclusions

Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine is a challenge for mainstream IR paradigms because it seemingly disregards what has been an axiom for many – the high costs of war.

However, a more detailed look within the framework of several IR theories reveals that it is possible, that decision-makers in Moscow were aware of the dangers of war and nevertheless dared to start it. Factors outweighing the costs of war may be presented within three theories: security dilemma, rational choice and power transition. Considerations of security, shaped by specific perceptions and misperceptions, could have persuaded the Russian leadership that the war option is worth taking, since otherwise Russia may suffer a guaranteed loss. Rational decision-making could have been grounded in a wrong assessment of fundamental parameters for calculating the expected value of war, and in that case, a decision to invade is rather erroneous than irrational. Finally, power transition theory explains Russia’s invasion as resulting from a deteriorating international order caused by the rise of challenger(s) and the crisis of the Western leadership. From such a perspective, Russia’s calculations may have been overoptimistic in a hope to face less resistance in a war and get additional systemic wins in case of a victory.

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