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The US' (mis)perceptions of Russian power in the context of the Ukrainian war - the decline of the liberal international order?

Norberg, Ann Gertrud

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The US' (mis)perceptions of Russian power in the context of the Ukrainian war – the decline of the liberal international order?

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Ann Gertrud Norberg
S3196933

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Introduction

Since the end of Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international system has been driven by a unipolar world order led by a single power, the United States of America (US). After the sudden collapse of a bipolar world, the US gained superiority in all dimensions – economic, military, ideological and diplomatic – making it the most powerful and unified hegemon in recent history while Russia was not expected to recover (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2021, p. 8). Leading the world in all elements of the international system, such as creating multilateral organisations and military alliances, it became evident that the perception of US’ power both domestically and internationally was hegemonic. However, in recent decades the US-led world order has been challenged by many crises and the rise of non-Western economic powers such as China, Iran and Russia, indicating a shift in the balance of power from a unipolar to a potentially multipolar world order (Marsh, 2012). The growth of alternative economic powers and alliances have weakened US’ hegemonic status and created a sense of insecurity and power struggle for the current leadership.

When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and later declared a full-scale war although presented by Putin as a “special military operation” on Ukraine in 2022, the US was one of the first states to show support by providing financial, and more importantly, military aid to Ukraine. This was in addition to heavy economic sanctions on the aggressor’s oil sales and financial transactions to protect democratic peace and the US-led world order (Chivvis, 2024, p. 27). At the time, there was a united consensus within the US Congress, think tanks and media organisations of the necessity to help Ukraine win the war as Putin “wishes to overthrow the whole liberal international system” and would not only conquer the land of Ukraine but restore the Great Russian territories (The Washington Post, 2022). However, some critics, most commonly from the realist school have argued that the US was not interested in protecting the sovereignty of Ukraine but to rather create a proxy war with Russia that would result in the weakening of its relative power and therefore neutralise the security threat on US’ hegemonic status (Dunford, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2022). Taking concrete measures such as introducing economic sanctions and ending trade with Russia, the US’ domestic but also the international perception was hopeful that severe damage could be caused and that would bring an end to the war (The White House, 2022). However today, more than two years after the beginning of a full-scale war and the establishment of the counter-measures by the US, Russia is still successfully carrying out its aims and overcoming the setbacks of being cut out of the Western economic institutions (Lawniczak, 2023). This puts the perception of both the strength of US’

capabilities as a “protector of the free world” and Russia’s level of dependence on the Western institutions under question, potentially challenging the future success of the liberal international order (LIO). The aim is to solve the puzzle of whether the US’ foreign policy executive’s (FPE) official narrative around containing Russia and helping Ukraine defend its territory has been based on a misconception of both Russia’s power and their own capabilities. Most of the research that tries to analyse the current crisis in Ukraine is primarily focused on explaining Russian foreign policy decisions and goals in the region, while not considering the influence of other actors (Götz, 2016; McFaul, 2020). Even though a few neorealist scholars have discussed the role of foreign threat in Russia’s motives, they rely on a more systemic understanding of balance of power in the international system and therefore assess the role of the US more generally, while not explaining the specific failures of policymaking that are made in the domestic sphere. In order to fill the gap, this research seeks to understand US foreign policymaking in regard to the conflict in Ukraine and the incentives that lie in the decision-making through the neoclassical realist lens, taking into account the policymakers’ perceptions and pressure by the domestic public while also considering the importance of international threats and relative power dynamics. As a result, it is possible to look at an extremely contemporary and complex international conflict from a new angle while also getting an insight into how perceptions of power influence foreign policy decision-making. In order to carry out the analysis, the following research question is posed: *What is the effect of the US foreign policy executive’s (mis-)perceptions of Russian power in the context of the Ukrainian war in their efforts to maintain their hegemonic status in the LIO?* The main parts of this research project include: a short summary of the historical background, a literature review, theoretical background of the approach of analysis, research design, results, and a conclusion.

Historical background

After the collapse of the Soviet Union there were fifteen newly independent states that all had to rebuild their diplomatic and economic relations, many of which were interested in joining the liberal multilateral organisations and the free Western markets. In 1999, after Russia had been eliminated as a potential threat through the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US-led military alliance North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) started its eastward expansion. First welcoming post-Soviet states such as Poland and Czech Republic and later the Baltic states into the alliance. However, NATO enlargement was opposed by Russian leaders already in the 1990s as the experience of an expansion by a historic military rival near its border poses a major security threat and a question of survival for Russian existence, causing severe

imbalances of power in the region (Shleifer & Treisman, 2011, p. 128). Even though Russia did not directly react to the expansion before, after the 2008 Bucharest Summit where NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia was introduced, Russian president Vladimir Putin declared NATO's actions an active threat and a bright red line for Russia, which was completely ignored by the members of the alliance (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 79). After the conference the US and its Western allies kept strengthening diplomatic ties and making promises of continuing the efforts of bringing Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and later declared a full-scale war on Ukraine in 2022, Western countries, including the US, seemed shocked by these actions, calling it Putin's unprovoked imperialist plan of expansion (McFaul, 2020). Since then, the US, the European Union (EU) and many of its member states have been providing billions of euros worth of financial and military aid to Ukraine to contribute to the defense of its sovereignty (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2024; European Commission).

Literature review

The next section of this research paper will cover the relevant literature on this topic to provide a foundation for further research and to develop the research question. Evidently, as the war in Ukraine is the most prominent and serious military conflict in Europe since the Second World War, there is a lot of debate over the causes, outcomes, and implications. As Götz (2016) puts it, there are three perspectives at which observers of foreign policy in the context of the crisis in Ukraine position themselves – Russia as a revisionist, victim, or a troublemaker (p. 251).

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and more recently the war in Ukraine, the common understanding has been that the unprovoked conflict has been caused and fuelled by the imperialist leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin, due to his dissatisfaction with the US' hegemonic leadership and wish to cause entropy in the international system (McFaul, 2020, p. 97). From the Russia as a revisionist perspective, Putin's actions have been explained through his aims to make himself a part of history and reunite the territories that belonged to the Soviet Union and that the current conflict in Ukraine is only the beginning (Braun, 2014; Farmer, 2015; Masters, 2023). These positions are criticised by the Russia as a victim perspective and most famously by the offensive realist scholar, John Mearsheimer, who already in 2014 predicted the escalation by criticising NATO and more specifically the US for expanding its sphere of influence in the East and carrying out liberal imperialism in Ukraine and Georgia, two close allies of Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014). Other Western neorealist scholars such as Stephen Walt

agree with Mearsheimer, arguing that the war in Ukraine was avoidable if NATO had taken Russian national security threats more seriously. Walt argues that the alliance's expansionist strategy was a failure with severe consequences (Walt, 2024). According to Mearsheimer (2022), Dunford (2023) and many other realist scholars, Russia's security was threatened by the enlargement of the world's biggest military alliance, diminishing Russia's relative material power, and creating a major risk of survival, thus making the outbreak of the war almost inevitable. Some of Mearsheimer's critics argue that the realist approach, by taking into account only the struggles between great powers (Russia and the US), strips smaller powers, in this case Ukraine, from its agency and only depicts them as a victim (Kostelka, 2022).

In Götz's third perspective, Russia as a troublemaker, it is argued that Russian foreign aggression derives from Putin's need to assure domestic stability and security which is achieved by creating tensions abroad (Götz, 2016, p. 255). As Krastev and Holms put it, Kremlin (Russia's government) uses the rally-around-the-flag tactic causing international turmoil to control domestic pressures and increase nationalistic sentiments among its citizens (Krastev & Holmes, 2014). All three perspectives interpret Russian foreign policymaking in a different manner, therefore, also diverging in their explanations for the causes of war. This shows how perception of different actors plays a significant role in explaining international conflicts and their outcomes.

Alternatively, as Rumer and Sokolsky (2021) argue, NATO's enlargement strategy would have been different if the possibility of Russia's rise as a potential military power after the end of the Cold War had been taken seriously. They also say that much of the Western allies' foreign policy strategies of institutional enlargement in post-Soviet states were possible due to the weakened state of Russia and its inability to react. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the bipolar world order, the US and its Western allies no longer needed to take Moscow's interests into consideration when constructing their foreign policy (p. 8). As the previous US ambassador to Russia wrote in the beginning of the 2000s, Putin was seen as a more liberal and westward looking leader who, from the western perspective, no longer posed a threat to the hegemonic leadership of the US (McFaul, 2003). Even though Russia adapted to several Western norms and showed impressive economic growth after the regime change, many outside observers still saw Russia as an inferior and a weak power in the international system (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2021, p. 11). Hence, during the 2004 NATO and EU enlargement in the Baltic states, Russia was still too weak to react while its biggest rivals carried out their plans

for Eastward expansion. When the US started establishing further expansion in 2008 to Ukraine and Georgia, Russia was already able to react and later did so by first bringing troops to Georgia, then annexing Crimea and later declaring a full-scale war on Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2022). This suggests that many US foreign policy decisions, specifically on NATO enlargements were made based on misperceptions of Russia's relative power and ability to react after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As this research seeks to analyse the perception of Russia's relative power from the US FPE's perspective and the effects it has on their policy decisions, it is important to understand the relevance of perception in foreign policymaking. Misunderstandings of each other's power between Russia and the US date back to the onset of the Cold War, where the constant threat of the nuclear arms race fuelled the conflict between the two superpowers (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2021, p. 4). As discussed previously, since the 1990s, Russia has not been considered a threat for the US public, as even in 2015, after the annexation of Crimea, only 30 percent of the US population saw Putin's actions as critical for US security, whereas for Russia, NATO's enlargement in the region was considered as the highest potential military threat (Kropatcheva, 2012, p. 33; Smeltz et al., 2016, p. 2). Also, in the US 2012 Defence Strategic Guidance, the growing military threat of rising powers is highlighted but the countries under consideration are China and Iran but not Russia, meaning that at the time not even US domestic experts imagined Russia as a potential threat to security (Marsh, 2012). This can be seen in the US' reserved reaction to the annexation of Crimea, as only some economic sanctions were applied (Smeltz et al., 2018).

However, as some scholars argue, the strength and success of US' foreign policy is not determined by its international competitors but by domestic support which gives "usable power" for the policy-makers (Trubowitz & Harris, 2019, p. 619). They distinguish three domestic factors that have influenced the strength of US foreign policymaking, these include, political polarisation (both parties and its voters shifting to extremes), absence of a dominant foreign policy narrative (hard to mobilise the whole population) and the negative consequences of globalisation on the American working-class (p. 620). In addition, as Taliaferro et al. (2009) argue, foreign policymaking is heavily reliant on the personal perceptions of the executive which is influenced by the opinions and pressure from other political elites and domestic audience, meaning that often as a result the decisions end up being irrational and based on personal rather than national interests (p. 32). Hereby the insight into the existing debate on

the importance of perception in foreign policymaking and the different actors who influence it have been discussed with the main focus on the US and Russia. This leads to the next section where the theoretical approach of the research will be explored.

Theory

This research project aims to analyse the perceptions and misperceptions of power and the effects they have on foreign policy decisions, specifically in relation to the US-Russian relations and the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war. To this end, neoclassical realist theory has been selected as the appropriate framework, but first it is necessary to get a better understanding of realism and the difference between the sub-branches. Realism is one of the most prominent and oldest theories in the study of international relations that makes an effort to explain foreign policy decisions in an anarchic international system, where no state has monopoly over power, forcing them to concentrate on survival through self-help and securitisation (Wivel, 2017). In contrast to the domestic sphere, the international system has no overarching authority that could provide protection, making states insecure and embrace power-maximising in case there is a need to defend oneself from others.

Realism is considered a grand theory, which means it seeks to explain concepts and trends rather than specific cases or experiences, making it agreeable for theorists from all ideological backgrounds (e.g. conservatives like Henry Kissinger or Marxists like E. H. Carr) (Wivel, 2017). However, there are also substantial theoretical disagreements among realist scholars. In the structural realism school, most famously represented by Kenneth Waltz, the analysis of foreign policy is seen as separate from the external behaviour of states. Policy is viewed as illustrating the ideal goals of states but not the real outcomes – this limits the importance of foreign policymaking from the beginning (Waltz, 1996). However, structural realism disregards the possibility that states (or from the neoclassical realist perspective its FPE) might misperceive the systematic stimuli or relative power due to incomplete information on other states' intentions and therefore act irrationally or not in its self-interest (Ripsman, 2011). Structural realism is not interested in finding causes for specific wars but rather explaining systematic structures for why wars happen.

In the neoclassical realist school, foreign policy is analysed in a combination of the domestic, i.e. the public's preferences, and FPE's personal perceptions, and international level factors such as material capabilities (Foulon, 2017). It does still argue that in an anarchic system, states

are insecure and security maximising relative to other states, in terms of material capabilities which makes cooperation very difficult. However, it includes a layer of domestic interests allowing to explain events and concepts characterising specific cases and states which is something that other branches cannot. At the same time theories that only focus on the *innenpolitik* or domestic politics are too limited as they fail to include the crucial starting point of foreign policymaking that is states' relative material power in the international system (Rose, 1998, p. 148). Rose argues that states receive clear signals from the international system but in order to reach the national policy, they need to pass through transmissions belts of FPE perceptions and domestic politics, which can skew the rationality of the reaction to the signals (Rose, 1998, p. 169). Often when states are not in direct danger, they have a range of policy options to choose from as they do not have to act based on survival, which means the decisions can end up being irrational and not security-maximising (Taliaferro et al., 2009).

Even though Russia's war in Ukraine is not a direct threat to the survival of the US, it clearly challenges the power dynamics and therefore the hegemonic ruler of the LIO. In recent years, the discussion of the decline has become more prominent due to the rise of many non-Western powers such as China, Russia and Iran who are catching up to the US both economically and militarily, and through collaboration can seriously threaten US' leadership in the international system (Regilme, 2019, p. 162; Trubowitz & Harris, 2019, p. 619). Until now, the LIO has been built on liberal values e.g. promotion of democracy, multilateral institutions and human rights, but due to the growth of global economic inequality and military conflict, these values are being undermined by many members of the order (Acharya, 2017). As more previously liberal Western countries are turning towards far-right populism, the legitimacy and survival of the US-led order is under threat (p. 274).

Research design

Having discussed the existing literature and decided on the theoretical lens that this research will be conducted through, the next section outlines methodology, case selection and data analysis. This research is focused primarily on the US FPE's, which in this case is President Joe Biden's, foreign policymaking in regard to the war in Ukraine. In this research the war in Ukraine is considered as a case study, while the primary focus is on the power dynamics between Russia and the US. The reason for choosing this case was that it is the most recent and serious conflict between the two powers since the end of Cold War which can help to illuminate the relative power capabilities and therefore also analyse the strength of the current hegemonic

leadership. Taking that into account, the war in Ukraine is thus considered as an influential case in the context of the US-Russia relations as in the time of conflict, relative power dynamics become more apparent as do the perceptions of the FPE's through their decision-making. The war in Ukraine has had an influence on US-Russia relations, meaning that it is a relevant case to use in this research. As it is the first military conflict involving both Russia and the Western states since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it can help to map the miscalculations made from the US' side that have escalated the war to the point it is currently – Ukraine could be facing a defeat (Gardner, 2024). After carrying out an extensive literature review, the underlying premise of this research, that is argued through the neoclassical realist perspective, is that after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the US felt threatened and decided to use Ukraine as a proxy to weaken Russia's relative power and remove the international threat to its hegemonic rule. However, due to the FPE's misperception of Russian power but also US' own power, the foreign policy goal has not been achieved and therefore implies the possibility of US' hegemonic decline in the LIO.

However, first it is important to discuss what is (mis-)perception and how could it be measured and operationalised in the context of this research. As already understood, this research is focused on the misperceptions of power by the FPE, who in the case of the US is the President. Although it might seem that this indicates that the analysis will be conducted based on a singular actor but actually, in the construction of foreign policy, domestic elite interpretation of the international cues plays a crucial role as is argued by the neoclassical realist school of thought. Even though in a democratic nation, the FPE is first responsible to the general public, scholarly literature shows that people are actually not knowledgeable enough on foreign affairs leading to often taking cues and shaping accountability mechanisms based on their elite representatives (Saunders, 2015).

In the context of this research, domestic elites are considered as members of Congress who are the direct representatives of the people and hence, in theory, mirror the sentiments of the general public. The US has a two-party electoral system, the parties represented in Congress are the Democratic Party and the Republican Party who are in competition and try to block each other's bills in the House of Representatives, which is the lower chamber of the Congress. Even though the President generally has the backing of their own party, it is still beneficial to get the opposing side on board as well, in order to successfully pass the bills. That is why the perceptions of political elites are so crucial for making foreign policy decisions. Also, as

Saunders argues, domestic elite actors influence the FPE's perception much more than the public, as they incorporate four key features which include: stronger preferences, concentrated power which allows for anti-FPE coalitions, more access to information and are smaller in numbers so it is easier to mobilise (Saunders, 2015, p. 468). So, in this research the effect of domestic perception on the rationality of FPE's choices are considered in addition to the change in rhetoric and sentiments of the domestic elite over the course of the conflict. They will be discussed to support the argument that the FPE has miscalculated the relative power dynamics of Russia and the US, leading to domestic discontent and therefore a weakened position in the global sphere.

In order to explain the relationship between perception of power and the outcome of foreign policy, it is necessary to conduct a qualitative document analysis with both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include foreign policy documents such as fact sheets from important events and speeches by the FPE on significant events and changes in Ukraine, while secondary sources include news articles and opinion polls by political observers and specialists. Both primary and secondary sources are crucial for this analysis as the former give an insight into FPE's perception and understanding of the international signals, while the latter explain domestic constraints and provide additional perspectives. The primary sources will only include official documents and speeches published by the US government and are retrieved from *The American Presidency Project's* website that transcribes speeches and statements from the White House, making the collected information credible. For secondary sources, well-known news outlets e.g. the BBC and Council on Foreign Affairs that base their information and opinions on specialists from the field, will be considered. The time frame from which the primary data is collected is 24.02.2022 until 24.04.2024, as the war is still ongoing it is impossible to look at the conflict as a whole, whereas expert opinions about events from that time period can be published later than the end date. On the 24th of April 2024 the US sent its latest financial aid package to Ukraine that had struggled to pass the House of Representatives in the US Congress for months due to the delay brought about by the Republican party that has become more sceptical over the course of the conflict (Zurcher et al., 2024). As this research is not looking for systematic quantifiable results, but rather understanding perceptions and power dynamics, a qualitative document analysis will be applied to the collected data. The three different categories from which the US FPE's misperception of Russia's power is analysed include: the effect of Western economic sanctions on Russia, the effectiveness of foreign aid to Ukraine and the role of the conflict in US'

hegemonic leadership. These categories were chosen, as the first two include the main areas where Russia's ability to resist Western intervention was miscalculated and the latter to discuss the implications these miscalculations have on US' national and international interest.

Data Analysis

As discussed in the previous chapter, a qualitative document analysis will be conducted based on primary and secondary sources through three different categories. The main focus is on FPE's perception-based action and the larger consequences in case of miscalculations. In the analysis of presidential speeches, a lot of emphasis will be put on use of language and how it changes as more information becomes available and the understanding of relative power shifts. This helps to provide insight into Biden's perception of relative power and how it has been influenced by international and domestic cues as the war carries out. In order to analyse domestic elite perception of the war and their support for Biden's policymaking, statistics from opinion polls and statements from newspaper articles are used. Journal articles written by experts in the field will help to get a more objective overview of the success of the Western measures in regard to blocking Russia's ability to carry out its war aims and how the dynamic of the LIO might change in the case of Ukraine's loss. The results will be presented through first laying out Biden's choice of actions and the expectations for their effectiveness and then showing how they actually affected Russia or in the case of aid Ukraine's ability to protect themselves. This will allow for highlighting the areas of Biden's misperception of Russia's capabilities and US' own power which can lead into the analysis of how Biden's miscalculations affect the strength of the hegemonic leadership.

Economic sanctions on Russia

The first category where the US has misperceived the effectiveness of its own power through their ability to constrain Russian military operation in Ukraine is the effect of economic sanctions that the US and its mostly Western allies imposed on Russia after the outbreak of the war. According to liberal internationalism, one of the core elements of the US-led liberal international order is economic interdependence through multilateral trade which promotes international cooperation and increases the likelihood of global peace (Ikenberry, 2009, p. 82). That is why one of the first steps taken by the president of the US after the outbreak of the war in February 2022, was to introduce heavy economic sanctions and end bilateral trade agreements with Russia (Biden, 2022a). Even though having practiced the use of sanctions

already during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the effects of the new restrictions were much deeper (Smeltz et al., 2018). The main sanctions included exports that would limit Russia's ability to get access to crucial military technology and equipment while also restricting Russia's central bank and its ability to make transactions in Dollars, Euros, Pounds and Yens which are the dominant currencies of global trade (Biden, 2022a). By posing monetary sanctions, Biden planned to limit Russia's ability to finance the war in Ukraine and therefore force them to end it. He continued by saying "we're going to impair [Russia's] ability to compete in a high-tech 21st century economy", which indicates his belief in the effectiveness of the sanctions and wish to destroy Russia as an economic power in the international system (Biden, 2022a). In the same speech Biden also states that the coming days and months are going to be hard for all democracies but that he still has confidence in the effectiveness of his measures and the victory of Ukraine (Biden, 2022a). According to the Chicago Council of Global Affairs, in December 2022, 75 percent of the domestic public was also in favour of the sanctions, meaning that the international cues and the domestic perceptions supported Biden's understanding of the effectiveness of such measures (Smeltz et al., 2022).

The US also decided to target specific individuals, starting from the president Vladimir Putin, and moving on to the economic elites, ending up sanctioning more than 3,500 individuals and their assets (Welt et al., 2024). Moreover, the US banned imports of Russian gas and oil in March 2022, with the intention of creating major economic losses for Russia, as oil and gas made up 20 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP). In that announcement Biden highlighted the unity of the Congress in introducing the sanctions, saying "Republicans and Democrats alike have been clear that we must do this". He was confident that the sanctions will be effective, stating: "the American people will deal another powerful blow to Putin's war machine", indicating that he had full domestic support for his decision on the severity of the sanctions and their ability to damage Russian military capacity (Biden, 2022d). However, in reality, Russia has suffered from the economic sanctions much less than Western observers and Biden himself had anticipated, by predicting in June 2022, that: "Russia's GDP will likely decline by double digits" (Biden, 2022c). According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2022, right after the imposition of sanctions, Russia's GDP growth saw a decline of only 1.2 percent and an increase of 3.6 percent in 2023, while the US itself grew only 2.5 percent during the same year (International Monetary Fund, 2024). This means that even though Russia was not able to carry out trade or any other economic transactions with Western nations, the

expected consequences for Russia are not apparent, at least in the short-term. Leading to the conclusion that Biden had completely miscalculated the effect of economic sanctions on Russia's ability to finance its military without Western cooperation.

The explanation for this is that as the two Asian economic powers – India and China – have not joined the Western sanctions, Russia has been able to continue their exports of oil without losing much of the revenue that was previously collected from the West. In 2021, before the sanctions, Russian oil revenue was at \$110,1 bn while in 2023 it was expected to reach \$182 bn, which even shows an increase in collected profits (Dodonov et al., 2024; *Russia*, 2024). To compare the amounts of exports, in 2021, EU imported 114,35 million metric tons of oil from Russia while China alone imported 107.02 million in 2023 (Hale, 2023; He, 2024; Statista Research Department, 2023). India and China are now the primary destinations of Russian oil exports, making up for the loss from EU sanctions, while also sustaining the oil prices despite the price caps (Psaropoulos, 2023). However, for European countries, the effects of these sanctions were much more severe than for Russia itself. As Russia has been the biggest source of energy for European countries, the effects of sanctions led the EU's economic growth to decrease by half in 2023, not only weakening their economic power but surfacing a severe energy security threat on the international arena (Nelson, 2022).

In addition to bilateral sanctions, Russia was also removed from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) platform on which after the US, Russia was the second biggest user for cross-border transactions (SWIFT, 2022). Even though cutting Russia off from the biggest platform of global finance, it is still able to conduct business by now putting more emphasis on bilateral trade agreements with “friendly nations” such as India, with whom the diplomatic ties have not been cut (Venkiteswaran, 2023). Russia offers heavy discounts on oil in order to carry out transactions in domestic currency through outsider countries such as Dubai, which shows that Russia is again finding alternative routes to the liberal institutions that should tie the interdependent system of countries together (Venkiteswaran, 2023).

Furthermore, after a full year of on-going war, Biden kept emphasising the importance of complete support for Ukraine and the need to limit Russia's military capabilities. He highlighted the importance of unified sanctions and called for even further restrictions on Russia's economic activity saying that they will: “continue to maintain the largest sanctions

regime ever imposed on any country in history” (Biden, 2023a). However, there is a change in rhetoric as compared to the speech he gave the year before, he is now indicating that the conflict is going last much longer than first anticipated: “The defense of freedom is not the work of a day or of a year” (Biden, 2023a). Also on the domestic level, the Republicans, more specifically supporters of the previous President, Donald Trump, show diversion from the united support for American involvement in Ukraine (Smeltz & Kafura, 2024). This has complicated the decision-making for Biden as he also needs to appeal to the opposing side, especially with the upcoming elections in November 2024, where he needs face up against Trump once again.

After a long and peaceful period in Europe, Russia launched a full-scale military operation in Ukraine, posing a security threat to its regional competitors but also causing global tensions, including the spectre of the US losing its hegemonic role in the LIO. This explains why right from the beginning Biden decided to act in support of Ukraine, to eliminate the threat to the LIO and ensure US’ position in it. By having the support of international allies and both parties in the Congress (48 percent of Republicans and 61 percent of Democrats), Biden believed that his foreign policy decisions on sanctions would cause significant damage to Russia’s capacity to fight which would help end the war quicker (Nadeem, 2022). However, as ensuing events have shown, Russia is far from losing the war and the effect of the sanctions have shown to be weaker than anticipated. This has led to division in the support for Biden’s foreign policy-making, as only 7 percent of Republicans and 86 percent of Democrats find him as a suitable decision-maker compared to the Republicans in congress in 2024 (Brenan, 2024). The miscalculation of the US’ FPE is the result of Russia’s unanticipated ability to shift its oil market from the West to the East and rely on non-Western states to continue business as usual. As an economist, Maria Demertzis told Al Jazeera, it is hard to impose universal and effective sanctions when globally more than 50 percent of countries sided with Russia rather than Ukraine before the outbreak of the war (Psaropoulos, 2023). In addition, public belief in Ukraine’s capacity to win the war has decreased to an all-time low and has shifted towards an expectation of Russian victory (Brenan, 2024). Taking that into account, it is possible to conclude that Biden miscalculated Russia’s resilience to Western economic sanctions due to strong domestic support, Russia’s Non-Western alliances, and misperceptions of US’ own strength as the hegemon of LIO. As the domestic elite’s support for sanctions was strong, it also affected Biden’s decision-making, leading to unsuccessful power moves while also causing economic difficulties to the US and its allies’ economies. Even though both Biden and academic observers of the conflict keep highlighting the severity of the long-term effects of the

economic sanctions on Russia, it is currently not weakening the aggressor or contributing to the victory of Ukraine but rather extending the period of conflict and increasing the destructions in both Ukraine and in the power structures of the LIO (Biden, 2022c; Mohsin, 2024).

Providing aid for Ukraine

In addition to restricting Russia's economic activity, the US has also been providing Ukraine with military and humanitarian aid with the total of \$175 billion dollars over the span of two years (Masters & Merrow, 2024). Since becoming the hegemon, the US has been the leading provider of aid, exceeding any other country in the world. Since February 2022, Ukraine has been by far the biggest recipient of foreign aid, primarily to strengthen its military capabilities (*ForeignAssistance.Gov*, 2024). Right at the outbreak of war, Biden sent \$13.6bn dollars of aid to assist Ukraine but followed this by another package already in May which was triple the size of the first (Masters & Merrow, 2024). This was made possible due to the heightened support across Congress for sending both economic and military assistance as in March 2022, 74 percent of Republicans and 85 percent of Democrats were in favour of economic aid. However, in July, after the \$40.9bn package bill had been passed, Republican support had already fallen to 64 percent. Similar trends are visible for military aid, as the support in March 2022 was 80 percent for Republicans and 83 percent for Democrats and in July decreased to 68 percent and 79 percent respectively (Smeltz & El Baz, 2023). As the domestic perception of sending aid was getting more critical, it was also harder for Biden to execute his wishes to support Ukraine. Even though promising the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to continue sending economic and humanitarian aid in June 2023, the next package was only confirmed in April 2024, as Biden was struggling to get the bill passed in Congress for months (Biden, 2023b; Masters & Merrow, 2024). As the Republicans had gotten the majority in the House of Representatives in October 2023, they kept blocking the aid due to disapproval of Biden's foreign policymaking. This has led to only 30 percent of Republicans agreeing to support Ukraine for as long as it takes, which is the promise Biden made to Ukraine at the beginning of the war (Smeltz & El Baz, 2023).

Not only did Joe Biden misperceive the reliability of domestic support for his foreign policy decisions, but also the effectiveness of the aid for Ukraine's ability to resist Russian military invasion. In July 2023, Biden announced in a conference with the President Zelenskyy on Ukraine's accession into NATO, which would be only possible after the war has ended, that it would soon be happening as winning the war is: "just a matter of getting by the next few months

here”, highlighting his confidence in immanent Ukrainian victory (Biden, 2023d). However, since the beginning of 2024, more observers have started to claim the opposite, without receiving US aid for a year, Ukraine was on the brink of collapse (Dettmer, 2024; Gardner, 2024). The experts agree that sending aid is helping Ukraine to avoid collapse at the front but there are no signs of turning the war around, and more so winning the war against Russia. Especially as Western countries are also constrained by their domestic restrictions to keep sending the aid forever (Tooze, 2024). By October 2023, Biden was struggling to maintain domestic support, especially from the Republican party, due to people getting tired of the war and as Ukraine had not gotten the upper hand in the conflict, the usefulness of US aid was being questioned (Smeltz & El Baz, 2023). The shift in domestic attitudes is also present in the tone of Biden’s speech in Autumn 2023, as he now approached the congress directly by saying that he is: “counting on the good judgement of the United States Congress. There's no alternative”, when asked about the willingness of Republicans to pass another costly aid package (Biden, 2023c). However, even after convincing the Republicans to support sending aid to Ukraine, the verdict is not more optimistic, as on the battlefield Ukrainian troops were still outnumbered by 10-20 against 1 (Tooze, 2024). Not only is Ukraine smaller in troops but due to US’ aim to avoid direct conflict with Russia, there are restrictions on the equipment they can send, which leaves Ukraine in a big disadvantage also in resources (Masters & Merrow, 2024). As some experts say, the bill that was finally passed in April 2024, will only bring the western support back to the levels of early 2023, but not for long enough to increase Ukraine’s chances of victory (Trebesch, 2024).

It is also important to look at how international cues might affect states’ support for sending aid. As the EU and the US are the biggest allies and supporters of Ukraine, it is fair to assume that they also share similar patterns in financial assistance. Even though the level of support varies across the EU, it is still considered as a single unit in the majority of scholarship on the subject. According to the work of Trebesch et al. (2023), the EU has been providing more aid to Ukraine than the US since October 2022. Since then the trends have been very similar for both, as aid provision was increasing until March 2023 and was then in decline until February 2024, as both the EU and the US ran into domestic opposition (Trebesch et al., 2023). This indicates that in both cases, FPEs have simultaneously been influenced by international cues but also domestic constraints when making foreign policy decisions, which is in accordance with the neoclassical realist theory.

The chances of Ukraine's victory and the future of the LIO

Even though the US has always been generous in sending foreign aid in cases of domestic or international conflict, in order to maintain its hegemonic influence globally, in the case of Ukraine the reasoning is more existential (Fix, 2024). As Biden himself has claimed, leaving Russia's actions in Ukraine unpunished would give Putin, but also other challengers such as China, an understanding that the US is not doing its job as a peacekeeper and that there are no consequences to foreign aggression in the future (Biden, 2022b). However, there are also some radical neoconservatives, who are fixated on the goal of Ukraine's victory without a clear plan on how to achieve that. This is the most dangerous outcome for the Ukrainians as their domestic resources are being drained and cities destroyed while the US is trying to protect their own position in the international system (Shiffrinson, 2022). In addition to these two perspectives, there are also the pro-Trump Republicans who are very critical of Biden's economic and military support to Ukraine and demand higher contribution from the European allies, as the conflict in Ukraine poses a bigger threat to their security (Fix, 2024). As Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign is promoting protectionist economic policy and less international involvement, his elite supporters are often critical of Biden's foreign policy decisions and as discussed earlier, are blocking them in the congress (Debusmann Jr, 2023). As the domestic perception of the conflict varies, *the transmission belts*, a term discussed earlier and commonly used in neoclassical realism, become stronger and make it more difficult for Biden to make foreign policy decisions, so the likelihood of rational decision-making decreases (Rose, 1998, p. 147). With the upcoming elections in November 2024, and the increasing domestic discontent with sending support to Ukraine, it is getting more likely that Biden will abandon his "whatever it takes" mindset and reduce the aid-flows into Ukraine, which will have detrimental effect on Ukraine's survival (Sanger, 2024). This shows how the US FPE has misperceived both its own and Russia's power during the crisis and has therefore shifted the foreign policy decisions made due to domestic pressure. As discussed, failing to lead Ukraine to victory is a significant threat to US' hegemonic role in the international system that may lead to the collapse of the LIO and a rise of a non-western superpower. The power shift towards the East would lead to deviation from the promotion of liberal democracy and result in changes of norms and values, giving more executive power to rising powers of the international system

Evaluation and conclusions

This research project aimed to analyse the role of US' FPE's misperceptions of Russia's power on the US' foreign policymaking in the context of the war in Ukraine while seeking to maintain the status quo of the LIO. The two categories from which Biden's misperceptions were analysed are the role of economic sanctions on Russia and the effectiveness of aid provided to Ukraine. The third section of analysis focused on the consequences of those misperceptions on the future of the LIO. The effect of the extensive sanctions, both on financial transactions and economic activity, that were imposed on Russia from the beginning of the war have failed in their purpose and therefore weakened the role of the US as the economic hegemon of the current system. Russia was able to maintain its non-Western alliances and conduct oil business to support the military operation in Ukraine which has allowed for the extension of the war for at least two and a half years. Even though during the first year of the war, the US domestic elite and public were showing unified understanding of the necessity for the economic sanctions, then now, as the war is proceeding for its third year, the Republicans are disapproving of Biden's decisions of US involvement. Despite the fact that the US has been the biggest contributor of aid to Ukraine, its support has not been sufficient to bring victory against Russia. In the case of sending aid, FPE's decision-making was more heavily influenced by the domestic perception and as the trends in elite support were very similar to the ones for sanctions, the financial aid to Ukraine was blocked in the Congress for a year, causing severe damage to Ukraine's chances of winning the war. In addition, the discontent in the Congress has increased the popularity of the opposing candidate, Donald Trump, for the upcoming elections which is influencing Biden's decision-making also in the context of international politics. Many observers are questioning the role of the US as a hegemon of the system in the coming decades, as the number of conflicts which they are unable to solve keeps increasing, while the domestic audience gets more divided. Even though the decline of the US as a hegemon was already visible before the war in Ukraine, the increasing discontent at home and lack of trust internationally is making it more noticeable (Trubowitz & Harris, 2019, p. 637).

The results of this analysis are supported by the neoclassical realist theory of foreign policy that highlights the combination of international cues and domestic perception in the state's foreign policymaking. This paper has contributed to the debate of US' role in the conflict in Ukraine and the importance of domestic understanding and support for conducting foreign policy. However, it is important to reflect on some of the limitations that this research presents. Firstly, analysing the domestic perception based on only the opinion of the members of

Congress can be seen as too limited, narrowing the scope of the research, and therefore affecting the validity of the conclusions. In addition, as Trump lacks a coherent policy on Ukraine and rather draws from a populist rhetoric, it is hard to analyse the significance of his politics in this research. Furthermore, as this research is based on sources that were chosen by the researcher, there is a high likelihood of selection bias to support the narrative of the results. Which means there is a need for additional research with more systematic data collection to ensure that the biases have not deviated the results. Another aspect that would benefit from further examination is comparing the role of the domestic elite and the public in influencing the FPE's decision-making as assuming that the elite can be considered as a proxy of the public might be misleading but for the current research, the scope could not be as big due to limited capacity. Finally, as the war is still ongoing, it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions on the importance of the US in helping to stop the war, which calls for future research in International Relations. The same theoretical approaches should be used to find out whether the results would be similar after the end of the conflict.

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