

EMPIRE, IDENTITY, AND THE WAR FOR UKRAINE: HOW POWER NARRATIVES REDRAW THE SECURITY MAP.

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Abstract

This paper examines the interaction of power dynamics, strategic leadership, and identity in influencing modern security architecture, utilising the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a case study. It argues that contemporary conflicts are influenced by both material capabilities and leadership psychology, as well as narratives of national identity. The analysis illustrates how Putin's centralized, ideologically motivated command and the mythologised Russian identity resulted in strategic miscalculations, whereas Ukraine's decentralised leadership and resilient identity fostered resistance and garnered international support. The study indicates that these dynamics have reconfigured global security alignments, escalated arms races, and complicated diplomatic resolutions. A qualitative case study methodology is employed, integrating realism, constructivism, and leadership psychology. Secondary sources, such as academic literature, policy reports, and official statements, are meticulously examined to delineate the progression of strategic decisions and identity narratives. The study reveals that authoritarian decision-making, weaponised identity, and overlooked diplomatic opportunities exacerbate conflict and instability. Recommendations encompass institutionalising oversight on executive authority, fostering inclusive narratives to mitigate polarization, creating rapid-response diplomatic units, and enhancing hybrid security frameworks to deter future hostilities.

Keywords: Power Dynamics, Strategic Leadership, Identity, Conflict.

Introduction

In global security, power dynamics are influenced by both material capabilities and strategic leadership, as well as identity politics. The situation is marked by intricate geopolitical rivalries, hybrid warfare, and evolving alliances, requiring an examination of how leadership choices and collective identities affect security trajectories (Mearsheimer, 2023). Strategic command in security architecture denotes decision-making frameworks that direct state and non-state actors in the application of power, utilizing military, economic, or informational means. It transcends conventional hierarchies to encompass psychological, institutional, and ideological factors that influence leadership decisions in times of crisis (Nye, 2024). Effective strategic command necessitates the equilibrium of material capabilities and perception management, exemplified by Ukraine's decentralized defence strategies in response to Russia's invasion (Kofman & Lee, 2023).

Conversely, identity serves a dual and frequently paradoxical function in modern security architecture, both reinforcing domestic legitimacy and exacerbating international tensions. At the national level, narratives of identity function as potent instruments for regime consolidation and social mobilization. China's continual reference to its "century of humiliation" (1842-1949) fosters a siege mentality that legitimises authoritarian measures and military enhancement under the guise of "national rejuvenation" (Shambaugh, 2024; Zhao, 2023). Likewise, Russia's development of the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World) civilizational identity has been pivotal in garnering domestic backing for its intervention in Ukraine, portraying the conflict as a fundamental defence against Western cultural imperialism (Laruelle, 2023; Tsygankov, 2024). These identity constructs often result in security dilemmas in the international arena. When national identities are articulated in terms of civilizational or historical grievances, they foster zero-sum perceptions that impede diplomatic compromise. Constructivist scholars assert that such narratives become "locked in" through institutionalization within educational frameworks, media systems, and commemorative practices, rendering them resistant to alteration despite being materially detrimental (Wendt, 2024; Subotić, 2023). Serbia's Kosovo policy exemplifies how mythologised historical narratives, such as the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, can limit rational security assessments across generations (Gordy, 2023). Strategic command and identity collectively redefine security architectures by influencing threat perception, alliance formation, and conflict justification. Comprehending their interaction is essential for forecasting escalation trends and formulating robust security policies (Allison & Blackwill, 2023). This research utilizes a case study methodology, focusing on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, wherein strategic command and national identity significantly impacted military and political results. Theoretical frameworks from realism (Waltz, 2023), which emphasizes power balances; constructivism (Wendt, 2024), focusing on normative structures; and leadership psychology (Hermann, 2023), examining decision-making biases, are utilized to evaluate multidimensional power projection, perception, and resistance dynamics. Alternative

strategies are examined to obtain policy insights for future conflict mitigation and crisis management. The study contributes to existing scholarship on the subject matter by integrating realism, constructivism, and psychological leadership theory to examine the multidimensional drivers of the conflict.

Aim of the Study

The central aim of this paper is to examine how the interplay of power dynamics, strategic leadership styles, and national identity narratives shapes the conduct, duration, and broader security consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war, and to derive lessons for contemporary conflict prevention and global security architecture.

Research Questions

The study will address the following questions:

1. How did Vladimir Putin's centralized, ideologically driven leadership contribute to strategic miscalculations in the invasion of Ukraine?
2. In what ways did Ukraine's decentralized command structure and resilient national identity enable effective resistance and international mobilization?
3. How have these leadership and identity dynamics, combined with failed diplomacy, reconfigured regional and global security alignments?

Contributions

This study contributes to IR scholarship by integrating realist, constructivist, and psychological approaches in a single framework applied to an ongoing major conflict. It highlights the limits of purely materialist explanations, demonstrates the enduring power of identity narratives in modern warfare, and offers policy-relevant insights into preventing authoritarian miscalculation and identity-driven escalation, areas underexplored in much of the existing Ukraine-war literature.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design focused on the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2014–present, with emphasis on the 2022 full-scale invasion). The approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex, context-specific phenomena such as leadership decision-making, identity construction, and narrative contestation, where causal mechanisms are multifaceted and historical-ideational factors play a central role (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). Data are drawn exclusively from secondary sources, including: academic journal articles and books; think-tank reports (RAND, CSIS, Carnegie, Brookings); official statements and speeches (e.g., Kremlin.ru, Zelensky

addresses); leaked documents (e.g., Istanbul drafts); policy trackers (EU Sanctions, NATO reports); and reputable media analyses (Reuters, Foreign Affairs, The Economist). These sources were selected for their credibility, diversity of perspective, and temporal coverage. No primary data collection (e.g., interviews) was undertaken due to access and security constraints. Analysis proceeds through process-tracing: identifying key decision points, leadership behaviours, identity narratives, and their observable implications for conflict trajectory and international response. Triangulation across Western, Russian, and Ukrainian sources helps mitigate bias, while explicit theoretical lenses guide interpretation.

Theoretical Framework

To comprehensively analyse the Russia-Ukraine war as a case study for this research, it is essential to establish a robust theoretical framework that clarifies the interplay among the study's variables. Theories of international relations (IR) offer distinct yet complementary perspectives, each emphasizing specific facets of conflict. This research synthesizes the realist, constructivist, and psychological leadership frameworks to deliver a nuanced analysis of Russia's motivations for initiating the conflict, Ukraine's resistance, and the implications of these dynamics for contemporary security trajectories.

Realist Perspective: Authority, Existence, and Geopolitical Assessment: Realism is a principal theoretical framework in international relations, originating from ancient political philosophy. This framework highlights power, national interests, and the anarchic characteristics of the international system. The core principle of realism posits that nations function within an anarchic international system lacking a central authority, compelling them to seek power for self-preservation (Mearsheimer, 2001). Waltz (1979) asserts that this results in a "self-help" system in which governments must rely on their own resources for security. From a realist viewpoint, international politics fundamentally constitutes a struggle for supremacy among self-interested nations operating within an anarchic structure (Mearsheimer, 2001). Consequently, states prioritize survival above all else, with their actions informed by rational evaluations of relative strength and susceptibility. Within the framework of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, realism views Putin's actions as a strategic response to perceived threats, particularly the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Mearsheimer (2022) argues that Russia perceived NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe as an existential threat, fearing encirclement and a diminution of its influence within its historical sphere of control. Moscow perceived Ukraine's alignment with the West, particularly its aspirations for NATO membership, as a pivotal juncture necessitating military intervention. In this context, realism depicts the invasion as a pre-emptive measure to prevent Ukraine from becoming a Western bastion along Russia's borders.

While realism clarifies the structural factors that motivated Russia's actions, it overlooks the impact of identity, ideology, and the psychology of leadership on decision-making. Consequently, Realism alone cannot fully elucidate the enduring nature of the conflict or Ukraine's resilience.

Constructivist Paradigm: Identity, Narratives, and Ideational Influence:

Constructivism contests the materialist foundations of realism by emphasizing the importance of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behaviour (Wendt, 1992). From this perspective, power includes not only military strength but also the narratives that affirm or refute actions. Putin's justification for the conflict is deeply rooted in identity-based concepts. His address depicts Ukraine as a "artificial state" (Laruelle, 2022), asserting that Ukrainians and Russians represent "one people" historically unified under Moscow's control. This narrative alludes to aspirations of Russian imperial magnificence, Soviet victories in World War II, and the concept of "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World), which asserts Moscow's cultural and political supremacy across the post-Soviet territory. Through the utilization of these historical and ideological motifs, Putin sought to legitimize the invasion domestically and undermine Ukraine's sovereignty on the international stage. Conversely, Ukraine's resistance has been revitalized by a counter-narrative of democratic self-determination, as demonstrated by President Zelensky's appeals to universal principles of freedom and sovereignty. Constructivism highlights how conflicting identities, such as Russian revanchism and Ukrainian nationalism, have exacerbated the war and shaped its trajectory.

Psychological and Leadership Studies: The Human Aspect of Strategy:

Structural and ideational theories offer macro-level elucidations, whereas leadership psychology concentrates on the micro-level decision-making processes of pivotal actors in international politics. Putin's personal history and viewpoint have profoundly influenced Russia's strategic choices. His KGB background and years of consolidating dictatorial power have fostered a zero-sum perspective, wherein compromise is perceived as a sign of weakness (Galeotti, 2019). This mindset is evident in his escalatory strategies, ranging from the 2014 annexation of Crimea to the 2022 full-scale invasion, which exemplify a propensity for high-risk manoeuvres bolstered by military power. Psychological research suggests that Putin's isolation within a restricted circle of confidants has exacerbated groupthink, leading to miscalculations such as the undervaluation of Ukrainian resistance (Baev, 2023). Zelensky's leadership style in Ukraine, marked by transparency, adaptability, and emblematic defiance, exemplified by his hesitance to leave Kyiv, has bolstered national morale and attracted international empathy. The interplay of these leadership dynamics demonstrates that security outcomes are shaped not only by systemic pressures but also by human agency. This comprehensive approach avoids reductionism by acknowledging the interrelation of material power, conceptual influences, and human actions. The expansion of NATO, a

concern rooted in realism, incited Russia's apprehension; however, Putin's response was influenced by his ideological perspective (constructivism) and personal risk tolerance (psychology). Ukraine's ability to withstand invasion derives not solely from military aid (material power) but also from the unifying strength of its national identity (constructivism) and Zelensky's leadership (psychology).

Within the context of the study, realism is operationalized to explain structural incentives and threat perceptions, particularly Russia's view of NATO expansion as an existential security dilemma, and to assess balance-of-power dynamics in alliance formation and military escalation. Similarly, constructivism is employed to trace how identity narratives (e.g., "Russkiy Mir" vs. Ukrainian civic nationalism) are constructed, institutionalized, and mobilized to legitimize or delegitimize violence, shape domestic cohesion, and influence international legitimacy. While Leadership psychology is applied to examine individual-level variables, cognitive biases, advisory group dynamics, risk propensity, and personality traits, that mediate between structural pressures/ideational frames and actual strategic choices, explaining variation in decision quality (e.g., overconfidence, groupthink in Moscow vs. adaptive leadership in Kyiv).

Identity and the Legitimacy of Power in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

The Russia-Ukraine conflict surpasses territorial disagreements, embodying a clash of divergent national identities and political legitimacy. Vladimir Putin described the invasion as a "special military operation" to rationalize aggression by appealing to Russian nationalism, anti-Western sentiment, and historical revisionism. Ukraine's robust national identity, reinforced by President Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership, has engendered domestic dissent and garnered international support (Kudelia, 2023). The ideological clash between Putin's authoritarian imperial nostalgia and Ukraine's democratic aspirations has shaped global perceptions of the war's legality (Snyder, 2023). This section examines Russian national identity and imperial nostalgia, Ukrainian counter-narratives and resistance, along with the immediate and enduring repercussions of the conflict. The subsequent paragraphs discuss these challenges.

Putin's justification for the conflict primarily relies on historical narratives that depict Russia as the rightful heir of Kyivan Rus, the ancient Slavic kingdom situated in contemporary Ukraine, and the Soviet Union's victory in World War II (Laruelle, 2022). By declaring Ukraine, a "artificial state," Putin seeks to subvert Ukrainian sovereignty and frame the invasion as a "reunification" of historically Russian lands. State media reinforces this narrative, portraying the conflict as a defence against NATO expansion and the deterioration of Western culture (Suslov, 2023). Nevertheless, this discourse has produced diverse repercussions within the nation. While it resonates with older, Soviet-era Russians, younger and urban populations display diminished enthusiasm, leading to

significant emigration and sporadic protests (OVD-Info, 2023). Globally, the narrative has proven counterproductive, as former Soviet nations such as Kazakhstan and Armenia have distanced themselves from Moscow's imperial rhetoric (Radio Free Europe, 2023).

The national identity of Ukraine has been cultivated over decades of independence (1991–present) and solidified following the 2014 Maidan Revolution, which resisted Russian hegemony in favour of European integration. President Zelensky's leadership during wartime particularly his choice to remain in Kyiv during the 2022 siege and his direct appeals to Western legislatures has emerged as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance (Plokyh, 2023). Unlike Putin's centralized dictatorship, Ukraine's military campaign has been characterized by decentralized resistance, featuring civilian territorial defence units and crowdfunded drone initiatives (The Economist, 2023). This opposition has enhanced Ukraine's international credibility. Surveys indicate that over 90% of Ukrainians now solely identify as Ukrainian, rather than Soviet or Russian, reflecting a substantial increase from pre-2014 data (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2023). Western support has remained steadfast, with the U.S. and EU providing over \$200 billion in military and economic aid by 2024 (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Short- and Long-Term Consequences of the Conflict

Short-Term Impacts:

- **Humanitarian Crisis:** The conflict has caused the displacement of nearly 8 million refugees and an additional 5.3 million individuals internally displaced (UNHCR, 2024). Cities such as Mariupol and Bakhmut have been devastated, with civilian fatalities exceeding 30,000 (OHCHR, 2024).
- **Economic Disruptions:** Global energy and food prices surged due to disruptions in Ukrainian grain exports and decreases in Russian gas supplies. The IMF forecasts that global inflation peaked at 8.8% in 2022, with Europe experiencing the most significant effects (IMF, 2024).
- **Security Realignment:** NATO experienced considerable expansion with the accession of Finland and Sweden (2023–2024), marking the alliance's most significant growth in decades (NATO, 2024).

Short-Term Impacts:

- **Geopolitical Disintegration:** The conflict has accelerated the Russia-China alliance, leading to a 64% rise in trade between the two countries since 2022 (SCMP, 2024). Simultaneously, the West has strengthened alliances through the G7's \$50 billion loan for Ukraine (2024) and increased collaboration in the Indo-Pacific region (Burns, 2023).

- **Arms Competition:** In 2023, European defence spending rose by 13%, with Germany pledging to exceed NATO's 2% GDP threshold (SIPRI, 2024).
- **Normative Transformations:** The conflict has necessitated a reevaluation of sovereignty criteria, as the UN General Assembly has repeatedly denounced Russia (143–5 votes in 2023) and the ICC has released arrest warrants for Russian officials (Allison, 2024).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict fundamentally represents a contest for identity and legitimacy. Putin's imperial romanticism has clashed with Ukraine's democratic aspirations, reshaping global alliances and security structures. Notwithstanding Russia's strategic setbacks, Ukraine's persistent conflict continues to test the fortitude of Western support. The war's repercussions are likely to influence international relations for decades, encompassing military doctrine, energy security, and human rights standards.

Failed Negotiations and Missed Diplomatic Alternatives in the Russian-Ukraine Conflict

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has experienced multiple moments where diplomatic breakthroughs appeared feasible; however, these efforts ultimately faltered due to reciprocal mistrust, heightened expectations, and the adverse effects of war crimes. Two significantly impactful missed opportunities are the March 2022 Istanbul negotiations and the potential extension of the 2022 Grain Deal. These issues illustrate how rigid stances and the dynamics of escalating violence precluded potential avenues for de-escalation, which will be elaborated upon in the following paragraphs.

In the weeks following Russia's extensive invasion, Ukrainian and Russian delegations engaged in a series of discussions in Istanbul, Turkey, orchestrated by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Draft agreements from these discussions, later disclosed to Reuters (2022), indicate that both parties were closer to a resolution than is frequently remembered. The essential elements of the provisional agreement included:

- **Ukrainian Neutrality:** Ukraine would formally relinquish its aspirations for NATO membership and adopt a non-aligned status, potentially underpinned by international security guarantees (Reuters, 2022).
- **Withdrawal of Russian Forces:** Moscow will retract its troops to the positions occupied prior to February 24, thereby terminating their attempt to seize Kyiv (Ukrainska Pravda, 2022).
- **Security Assurances:** A coalition of nations, potentially comprising the U.S., UK, France, and Turkey, would extend military and economic support to Ukraine without conferring NATO membership (Kudelia, 2023).

The Istanbul process eventually failed due to three interconnected reasons:

- **Putin's Excess:** Despite Ukrainian concessions regarding neutrality, Russia persisted in its demand for the acknowledgment of Crimea as Russian territory and sought autonomy for the Donbas, conditions that would have effectively legitimized the 2014 annexation and ongoing separatist claims (Wilson, 2023). This excess illustrated Putin's ideological fixation on Ukraine as a non-sovereign entity (Laruelle, 2022).
- **The disclosures regarding the Bucha Massacre in April 2022:** As evidence of Russian war crimes in Bucha and other occupied areas emerged, the willingness of Ukraine and the West to negotiate with Moscow diminished. Zelensky, initially amenable to neutrality, stated that negotiations became impracticable following the atrocities (Kudelia, 2023). The massacre reinforced Ukrainian public sentiment, with surveys revealing an 85% opposition to territorial concessions (KIIS, 2022).
- **Western Scepticism:** U.S. and European officials, particularly CIA Director William Burns (2023), have articulated doubts regarding Russia's genuine intent in negotiations, perceiving the talks as a tactical postponement to enable military restructuring. This scepticism was reinforced by Putin's April 2022 appointment of hardliner Alexander Dvornikov to command operations, signifying an escalation rather than a de-escalation (RAND, 2023).

If Russia had consented to a more direct withdrawal-for-neutrality accord in March, without demanding recognition of annexed territories, it might have averted the subsequent Ukrainian counteroffensives and Western rearmament. However, Putin's ideological rigidity and belief in inevitable military victory eliminated this possibility (Galeotti, 2023).

The Grain Deal Expansion: A Lost chance for Incremental Trust Building.

The Black Sea Grain Initiative was instituted in July 2022 through the mediation of the UN and Turkey, illustrating that pragmatic cooperation between Russia and Ukraine was attainable despite the enduring conflict. The agreement enabled the reinstatement of Ukrainian grain exports to avert a global food security crisis. It established a viable diplomatic channel between the opposing factions in Istanbul. Analysts at the OSCE (2023) assert that the Grain Deal may have been expanded to include:

- **Localized Ceasefires:** Temporary armistices instituted in proximity to humanitarian corridors or nuclear installations (e.g., Zaporizhzhia) to cultivate trust.
- **Prisoner Exchanges:** Significant exchanges of prisoners of war (POW) that occurred later than they could have been organized.
- **Energy-for-Food Extensions:** Proposals to link grain exports with Russian energy supplies to Europe were proposed but ultimately not pursued (Financial Times, 2022).

Russia's decision to militarize the Grain Deal, which often disrupted participation and targeted port infrastructure, undermined confidence. As of October 2022, Moscow utilized the agreement to seek sanctions relief, a correlation that the West denied (UN Report, 2023). Simultaneously, Ukraine's military successes in Kharkiv and Kherson reduced its incentive to offer concessions. A sustained grain-for-energy accord, coupled with intermittent ceasefires, may have created a foundation for comprehensive negotiations in late 2022. However, this required Russia to separate food security from geopolitical considerations, a step that Putin's administration exhibited hesitance to pursue (OSCE, 2023). The collapse of these diplomatic channels relegated both parties to a protracted war of attrition. The failure of the Istanbul negotiations underscores how ideological extremism (Putin's repudiation of Ukrainian statehood) and the repercussions of atrocities (Bucha) can overshadow rational cost-benefit assessments. The limitations of the Grain Deal demonstrate that even successful transactional diplomacy struggles to transform into a thorough conflict resolution without mutual concessions. As the conflict continues, the prospect for diplomatic resolution declines. Understanding these overlooked opportunities is essential, not only for historians but also for politicians facing future conflicts, as early diplomacy may avert catastrophe.

The failure of diplomacy in Ukraine is mirrored by other breakdowns in international negotiations, revealing a recurring pattern of mistrust, ideological rigidity, and domestic political constraints. At the World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference in Abu Dhabi (2024), attempts to reform agricultural and fisheries subsidies collapsed. Delegates extended existing digital trade moratoriums but failed to deliver structural reforms, exposing the difficulties of consensus in a climate of rising protectionism (CNBC, 2024). Similarly, the India–US trade talks in 2025 collapsed after India resisted American demands to reduce tariffs on agricultural imports. While defence and energy cooperation advanced, trade negotiations reached a stalemate, underscoring the impact of domestic constituencies on international bargaining (Business World, 2025).

Beyond trade, peace negotiations have also faltered. The US–China tariff discussions in 2024, intended to end reciprocal sanctions, broke down after a 90-day

suspension expired without substantive progress. Both sides resumed tariff escalation, demonstrating the persistence of zero-sum logics in global economic rivalry (Deutsche Welle, 2024). Likewise, African peace processes provide further examples: the Sudan ceasefire negotiations in 2025 failed as the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces rejected confidence-building measures such as city withdrawals and humanitarian corridors, worsening an already dire humanitarian crisis (AllAfrica, 2025). The Luanda Roadmap for resolving tensions in the Democratic Republic of Congo also collapsed in 2024, when Rwanda withdrew from final-stage talks, exposing the fragility of regional diplomacy (Deutsche Welle, 2024).

Domestic-level talks also highlight the fragility of negotiation. In Pakistan, political dialogue between the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the ruling coalition collapsed in 2025. Disagreements over prisoner releases and judicial reforms prompted PTI's withdrawal, aggravating polarisation (Wikipedia, 2025). Taken together, these examples demonstrate that whether in global trade, peace negotiations, or domestic political settlements, inflexibility and mistrust repeatedly obstruct compromise. This wider trend resonates with the Russian–Ukrainian context, where maximalist demands, ideological rigidity, and atrocities such as Bucha undermined the potential for an early settlement.

Challenges in Modern Conflicts

1. Centralized and Authoritarian Decision-Making: A key challenge in modern conflicts is the over-concentration of power in the executive, which often leads to miscalculations. Authoritarian leaders tend to disregard expert advice, politicize intelligence, and restrict legislative oversight, as seen in Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Such environments limit the effectiveness of strategic checks and balances.

2. Entrenched Identity Politics and Weaponized Narratives: Another major challenge is the persistence of identity-based conflicts, where historical grievances and national myths are used to mobilize populations and justify aggression. Such narratives, deeply embedded in educational systems and media, are resistant to change and often polarize societies further. Diaspora communities can also amplify divisions rather than bridge them.

3. Diplomatic Stalemates and Breakdown of Trust: Efforts at negotiation are frequently undermined by deep mistrust, excessive demands, and the impact of atrocities, such as the Bucha massacre, which harden public opinion against compromise. Neutral mediators are often perceived as biased, while early diplomatic windows are missed due to escalatory violence.

4. Fragmented Global Security Architecture: Global responses to aggression face significant challenges, including the uneven capacity of states to coordinate cyber defence, the risk of sanctions driving authoritarian regimes closer together (e.g., Russia and China), and the dismissal of Western-led initiatives as biased propaganda. These dynamics weaken deterrence and embolden aggressors.

Conclusions

The Russia-Ukraine war has revealed a fundamental truth about modern conflicts: power is exerted not solely on battlefields, but also through the intricate interplay of strategic leadership, national identity narratives, and the psychology of decision-making. What began as a bid for rapid territorial acquisition, driven by Putin's paranoid realism, imperial nostalgia, and authoritarian centralization, has evolved into a prolonged struggle over historical legitimacy, alliance reconfiguration, and the very foundations of European security. Through the integrated lenses of realism, constructivism, and leadership psychology, this study demonstrates how Putin's lethal combination of ideological rigidity and insular decision-making transformed a calculated regional power play into a strategic quagmire. His misjudgement of Ukrainian identity, dismissal of military realities, and contempt for meaningful diplomacy have exacted immense costs on Russia while exposing the vulnerabilities of over-personalized authoritarian governance. In contrast, Ukraine's resistance, fortified by Zelensky's visible, adaptive leadership, decentralized defence structures, and a consolidated civic national identity—has proven more enduring than Russia's material advantages alone might suggest. Narratives of democratic sovereignty and self-determination have functioned as a form of asymmetric power, sustaining domestic unity and securing unprecedented levels of Western military, economic, and moral support.

The repeated failure of diplomatic off-ramps, from the promising but ultimately derailed Istanbul talks of March 2022 to the limited successes and subsequent collapse of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, underscores a broader pattern: ideological extremism, mutual mistrust, and the hardening effects of atrocities (such as Bucha) can eclipse rational cost-benefit calculations, even when pragmatic pathways exist. These missed opportunities, mirrored in other global negotiation breakdowns, highlight the fragility of trust in an era of weaponized identities and zero-sum perceptions. As the conflict persists into 2026, marked by ongoing Russian advances in certain sectors, intensified aerial campaigns against Ukrainian infrastructure amid a harsh winter, and intermittent trilateral talks involving the United States (with discussions resuming in early February amid reported progress on security guarantees but persistent divides over territory), the war's lessons remain stark and urgent. Power in contemporary warfare is multifaceted: military might erodes without legitimacy, adaptability, and accurate intelligence; identity can serve as a resilient shield, outlasting artillery barrages; and leadership choices, whether isolating or inclusive, prove as decisive as hardware.

The repercussions extend far beyond Ukraine's borders. NATO's expansion to include Finland and Sweden, deepened Russia-China alignment, accelerated European defense spending, and renewed debates over sovereignty norms and energy security will shape international relations for decades. The conflict has exposed the perils of reviving 20th-century imperial ideologies in an interconnected, hybrid-threat world, while illustrating that resolve, innovation (from crowd-funded drones to global information campaigns), and narrative resilience can challenge even the most deterministic assessments of power. Policymakers must internalize these insights: future security architectures require not only military deterrence and alliances but also mechanisms to counter weaponized narratives, institutionalize checks on executive overreach, and create rapid diplomatic channels to exploit early windows for de-escalation. In Ukraine and beyond, the enduring contest will favor those who recognize that true authority rests not merely in coercion, but in the ability to inspire legitimacy, foster adaptability, and earn the right to lead in the eyes of both domestic populations and the international community.

To resolve the identified issues and related challenges, the following recommendations are suggested:

- **Reforming Strategic Decision-Making to Mitigate Authoritarian Miscalculations:** To avert authoritarian miscalculations, nations must institutionalize limitations on executive power, mandate independent "red team" exercises, amend legislative war powers, and establish intelligence review boards to assess evaluations, thereby reducing biases induced by leaders, as evidenced by Putin's actions in Ukraine.
- **Mitigating Identity-Based Conflict Through Narrative and Inclusion:** To address weaponized nationalism, the EU and NATO should fund fact-checking centers, promote inclusive education, engage diaspora communities, and utilize dual-language media to counter Kremlin disinformation and diminish polarization.
- **Establishing Efficient Diplomatic Off-Ramps in Prolonged Conflicts:** Prompt mediation is crucial to avert protracted warfare. The UN must create a permanent

rapid-response team, similar to the OSCE's Vienna Group, at the initial sign of escalation, while neutral countries like Turkey and Indonesia could facilitate backchannel negotiations.

- **Strengthening the Global Security Framework Against Authoritarian Aggression:** Preventing future invasions requires hybrid solutions. NATO's Cyber Defence Centre should actively expose misinformation, similar to the Dutch "pre-bunking" approach, while sanctions frameworks, like the EU's "Sanctions Envoy," must promptly target oligarch assets upon the identification of threats.

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