

The End of the Post-Cold War: An Analysis of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and its Insights into Epochal Change and Continuity

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Marking the culmination of tension, Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has been deemed an epoch-defining moment. With the return of war to mainland Europe, substantively divided along an updated Russia/West binary, the conflict has been perceived as the end of the post-Cold War international order. This article will challenge the prominence of this assertion. An analysis of the conflict's first twelve months reflects upon the relative insights into contemporary relations of power and the foundations which structure them. Rather than marking an epochal shift, this article maintains that the war constitutes the culmination of a transition to a new, 'post-post-cold-war order'. It facilitates the retrospective placement of this transition onto the Georgia-Russia conflict of 2008. Additionally, differentiation between relations of power (and the changing nature of power itself) can be revealed alongside underlying structural continuity. Revanchist ambition has coincided with the decline of US hegemony and the emergence of competing and ill-defined polarities. This increased obscurity echoes interconnection, an enlarged non-aligned movement, and the increased assertiveness of alternative geopolitical actors, such as China. Yet, hierarchies have continued to permeate the system's anarchic foundations, proving both material and racial in nature. Thus, offering a point of retrospective comparison, this article assesses the war's insight into the respective relations of power which have differentiated and shaped the contemporary and post-Cold War periods. It does so alongside the exposure of the foundational continuity which prescribes them.

Marking the culmination of tension, Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the 24 February 2022 has been deemed an epoch-defining moment. With the return of war to mainland Europe, substantively divided along an updated Russia/West binary, the conflict has been perceived as the end of the post-Cold War international order. Despite the contemporary prominence of this assertion¹, this article challenges the aforementioned temporal continuum as the basis for conceptualising the post-Cold War international order. Instead, understanding the period to constitute a distinctive balance of power between Russia, the US and the post-Soviet states, this article suggests that, beginning with the Soviet Union's dissolution, the epoch concluded with the Georgia-Russia war in 2008.

These temporal parameters do not suggest that Russia ever assumed a position of benignity. Indeed, its opposition to the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was widely noted. Rather, it reflects on the relations of power whereby, throughout the period, Russia lacked the means to exert itself. The war against Ukraine, building on the 2014 annexation of Crimea and an increased assertiveness toward territorial reconstruction, was rooted in historical causal factors and not immediate geopolitical developments. Consequently, this article will argue that Russia's war with Ukraine represents a manifestation of the transition away from the post-Cold War order. The conflict does not, in its own right, represent change, but, through retrospective comparison, provides evidence that the era concluded in 2008 in correspondence with changing relations of power. Beyond revealing temporal change and an evolving balance of power, entering a 'post-post-Cold War international order' (herein referred to as the contemporary order), the war against Ukraine enables a foundational analysis of the international system's underlying structural continuity. At a substantive and theoretical level, the war in Ukraine reveals relations of power and the foundations which structure them.

¹ See Hiroshi Nakanishi (2022) 'The impact of the war in Ukraine on the global system', *The Japan Institute of International Affairs*, 29 September.

Structurally, and developing from the post-Cold War period's conceptualisation, this article will explore the balance of power that guides the international order. It will demonstrate that Russia's contemporary employment of revanchist ambitions corresponded with the decline of US hegemony and the emergence of competing and ill-defined polarities (Porter 2020, 125). Retrospective comparison affirms that the post-Cold War period represented a distinctive balance of power rather than ideational uniformity. Further, this article will argue that the war exposes the paradoxical structural foundation of the international order which, proving both anarchic and hierarchical, guides these evolving power relations. One state's relative ability to act anarchically and pursue self-interest is prescribed by its socially conditioned position in the informal hierarchies. Whilst a transforming power balance marked a distinctive conclusion to the post-Cold War order, foundationally, the underlying hierarchies have remained. Notably, this refers to not only material but racial hierarchies.

Therefore, this article maintains that Russia's war against Ukraine represents a culmination in the transition away from the 'post-Cold War international order', along the conceptualised balance of power framework. Not only does it, through retrospective comparison, reveal the relations of power which distinguish and shape both the contemporary and post-Cold War periods, but it also offers insight into the foundational continuity which prescribes them.

CONCEPTUALISING THE 'POST-COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL ORDER'

From the collapse of the Eastern bloc and its Soviet overlord between 1989 and 1991 came the emergence of the post-Cold War international order. The order's initial decade saw Francis Fukuyama optimistically declare the 'end of History', with US liberal democracy deemed the final and accepted form of government (Fukuyama 2012). Yet, rather than being characterised by a uniform ideational transformation, as the Communist system inwardly imploded, the epoch was characterised by a shifting balance of power toward US unipolarity, with its temporal framework shaped accordingly. These relations of power dictated Russia's actions toward both the US-led West and the post-Soviet states within Eastern Europe.

Fukuyama's narrative reductively mischaracterised the international order, conflating a hegemony of power with ideational dominance. For instance, the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, which paved the way for NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe (Rynning 2015, 542), did not, as Fukuyama's disciples have sought to present, suggest a Russian endorsement of a universal liberal ideology. Instead, it reflected Russia's incapacity to counteract US-led encroachment, a consequence of politico-economic frailty. Put another way, post-Soviet Russia was not ideationally accommodating of its own accord, and, consequently, the Cold War's aftermath is better expressed through relations of power which prescribed the relative capacity for action. Indeed, the 1997 Act coincided with high Russian debt and an unstable and inflationary currency, ultimately leading to a multi-billion dollar International Monetary Fund (IMF) support package. Accordingly, the 'liberal international order', as the post-Cold War period is often synonymised with, was only liberal in so far as the balance of power impeded opposition.

In actuality, the post-Cold War order's power imbalance and NATO's encroachment into historically Russian spheres of influence only strengthened Moscow's resistance to incorporation. Echoing Alexander Wendt's constructivist argument that state behaviour is guided by both power and emotions, Russian resistance proved revanchist. Stemming from a damaged sense of honour (Tsygankov 2014, 270), policy sought to challenge territorial and status losses. This permeating opposition is substantiated by the Russian closure of gas pipelines running through Ukraine in 2006, which occurred in response to Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution'. This revolution saw a disputed and 're-run' run-off election, marred by accusations of fraud, leading to the establishment of a pro-European Union (EU) government. In lieu of Russia's inability to employ military force, the closure of gas represented a demonstration of opposition, highlighting the complicated relationship between Russia and post-Soviet states. Thus, the seemingly 'permissive' Russian state, allowing expansion into its sphere of influence, did not reflect a post-Cold War ideational incorporation, nor did it suggest support for Eastern Europe's integration with its Western counterpart. Instead,

and in contrast to the 'End of History' thesis, it reflected the imbalanced relations of power, specifically characterised by Russian frailty. It was this imbalance that shaped the nature of the post-Cold War international order.

Accordingly, although Russia's war against Ukraine provides the opportunity to retrospectively substantiate these characterising assertions, this article maintains that the post-Cold War period concluded with the 2008 Georgian war. The deployment of Russian military force in this conflict represented a decisive response to the US's proposed membership of Georgia. More broadly, the invasion echoed the assumptions of offensive realist theory, whereby Russia, within the Hobbesian and anarchic state of nature (Mearsheimer 2018, 134), sought to maximise its power by pre-emptively asserting hegemony within its near-abroad region.

Although, as alluded to above, Russian opposition to the US-led security architecture was present throughout the period (Asmus 2009, 218), 2008 provided the first example of post-Soviet Russia enacting border changes through military activity. This, in conjunction with their targeting of the Georgian-based western-owned oil pipelines during the conflict (Rich 2012, 94), embodied the conclusion of the post-Cold War order. Evolving relations of power and a decline in US unipolarity transcended Russia's characterising inability to exert influence.

Therefore, whilst Russia's war against Ukraine may appear as part of the continuing genealogy of the post-Cold War order, the invasion in reality represents the *culmination* of a distinctive transition to a new order along changed parameters of power. The assertion of a definitive transition perhaps cohabits problematically with the title's specific emphasis on the war in Ukraine. However, a comparison of the current and previous engagement between Russia, the West and the intermediate post-Soviet states offers an opportunity to retrospectively substantiate the notion that the epoch has concluded and to reaffirm its characterising facets. For example, when compared to the aforementioned 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2014 revolution, replacing the pro-Russian Yanukovich, led to the annexation of Crimea, foreshadowing Russia's eventual invasion in 2022 (Casier 2018, 112). The unique context, whereby Russia retained the Sevastopol Naval Base within Ukraine's sovereign territory, remained largely unchanged. Given that the lease's finite nature ensured that tension permeated consistently, the key difference was Russia's increased assertion of power.

Similarly, although some scholars have led a rebuke of NATO activity,² emphasising its responsibility for instigating the conflict in Ukraine, it cannot be deemed *the* causal factor for triggering the war. Whilst NATO policy may have exacerbated tension, both France and Germany had previously vetoed Ukrainian membership in 2008. Accordingly, these factors challenge the suggestion that the war against Ukraine stemmed from NATO-led geopolitical developments. In doing so, they affirm that differences in the assertiveness of Russian policy were, instead, a consequence of the shifting balance of power. Russia's limited participation in conflict during the post-Cold War period thus reflected a lack of power, and not an absence of desire. This highlights that the post-Cold War order was defined in nature by relations of power, rather than ideational harmony and a common subscription to liberal ideals. This analysis demonstrates through retrospection that the period concluded before the present conflict. Beyond reflecting on the past and its respective temporal parameters, as will be explored below, the war against Ukraine reveals the evolving balance of power as the international order enters a new 'post-post-Cold War' epoch.

THE POST-POST-COLD WAR EPOCH

Ultimately, the shift in the location and relative equilibrium of power under the contemporary international order has made relations less binary and defined. Indeed, the emerging consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine have highlighted this increasing complexity, with power 'shared' between multiple actors. Fundamental to this phenomenon is increased economic interconnectivity which has shaped both the contemporary and post-Cold War international orders.

² See the writings of, for example, Mearsheimer (2014) 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault', *Foreign Affairs*, 18 August

As the Communist bloc collapsed in on itself, free-market liberal economic theory expanded from the West. Although interconnectivity predated the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Iron Curtain truly entrenched integration. Even if the 'liberal' ideational aspect has since subsided in dominance, proving reliant on the aforementioned unipolarity of the post-Cold War epoch, its corresponding interconnections continue to prescribe economic engagement. This is because supply chains are dispersed around the globe, with multinational corporations transcending territorial demarcations in their manufacturing processes. Consequently, originating in the interconnectivity of the post-Cold War order, the contemporary balance of power has become increasingly ill-defined, with, in this case, Europe and Russia being mutually reliant on one another. This interdependency provides a partial explanation for the EU's muted response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, with EU-Russian trade reaching \$437 billion in 2012 (Menon and Rumer 2015, 122). Whilst subsequent Western sanctions against Russia have been remarkably stronger, interconnection has, nonetheless, ensured mutual damage. For instance, the freezing of \$350 billion worth of Russian assets and their expulsion from the SWIFT financial system has proven consequential (Atlantic Council n.d.). By limiting transactional efficiency, the action severely curtailed the access of Russian banks to the international markets. Yet, this accumulation of economic sanctions, both coercive and remunerative in nature, has been superseded by the importance of one factor — energy. Global price rises and instability, corresponding to European sanctions, culminated in Putin's decision to close the Nord-Stream 1 pipeline, nominally under the guise of damaged infrastructure. This illustrates the critical and mutual dependence between the EU and Russia. Whilst the former required energy supply, the latter leant on the European energy market as a foremost source of capital (Gabuev 2015, 3). Notably, this structural instability caused by energy interlinks was present throughout the post-Cold War order. However, its significance has only manifested after the period concluded, corresponding to Russia's increased capacity to exert itself.

Moreover, within Europe itself, the relative strength of interconnectivity has eroded previous clarity over the demarcation of power. Whilst the EU has uniformly implemented sanctions, its impact has been asymmetrical. Compared to Belgium's 22.2 per cent, Slovakia receives 78.4 per cent of its oil from Russia (Statista Research Department 2022). Accordingly, not only is the balance of power increasingly ill-defined between the West and Russia but, within the former, disparities of power exist. This suggests the redundancy of traditional balance of power theories as they produce overly simplistic, binary models which are incompatible with current relations. Thus, although Russia's war against Ukraine does not demonstrate a complete transition away from Western power, it points toward a new, complicated balance. The geo-politicisation of the world economy, entrenched in the post-Cold War order, has ensured that interconnectivity has impeded the clarity of contemporary demarcations of power.

Importantly, Russia's war against Ukraine has undermined the liberal school of thought centred on economic dependency theory. Grounded in the logic of interconnectivity, the theory argues that conflict proves increasingly unlikely due to the mutual economic incentive for peace and stability. Whilst the war affirms the analysis of the conflict's consequences, its existence undermines the presumed economically-incentivised avoidance, alternatively suggesting that nationalist tendencies and revanchist desires supersede economic rationalism (Mearsheimer 2018, 128; 205). This revelation points toward a tension that, even if economic interconnections transcend nation-state parameters, the latter continues to constitute the system's primary political actor. Accordingly, it can be argued that the war against Ukraine points to a second balance of power, one between nation-states and supranational actors. Put another way, the war reveals relations of power between atomistic nation-states and the institutional framework that guides their operation.

In this instance, the war highlights the inefficacy of international bodies, with institutions such as the United Nations (UN) unable to broker peace agreements or sanction Russia (which possesses a veto on the Security Council). Again, by comparing this current

incapacity to the post-Cold War 'high-point' of international legislation³, it can be seen that international enforcement mechanisms were never, in isolation, effective. The key differential was the US's relative unipolarity. Similarly, internationalist cooperation, which defines liberal ideals, manifested not due to uniform support but via the skewed balance of power which inhibited opposition. Thus, the current difficulties affirm that a change to the balance of power has arisen with the unique success of the prior period having stagnated. Consequently, despite entrenching economic interconnectivity, the post-Cold War order failed to supersede nation-states in favour of international institutions. Power, over liberal ideational conformity, is thus retrospectively confirmed to have been the explanatory and defining factor in the comparative internationalist success of the prior period.

Both the tension between economic interconnections and the political primacy of nation-states, and the growing complexity of relations of power can be viewed through the war's instigation of a grain crisis. In the first months of the war, Russia maintained a naval blockade on Ukrainian exports out of the Black Sea. Although a UN-backed grain deal is in place, it remains dependent on Russian cooperation. This affirms the UN's limited enforcement mechanisms and illustrates that the nature of conflict itself has shifted - a consequence of post-Cold War integration, with local disputes inflicting global ramifications. Indeed, the resultant rise in wheat prices has had a dire impact on the world's poorest regions. Sub-Saharan Africa imports 85 per cent of its produce, one-third of which originates from Russia or Ukraine (IMF Blog 2022). Moreover, supply chain considerations, whether that be food or energy, have led to an increasingly unaligned 'third movement'. On 2 March 2022, countries representing fifty-nine per cent of the world's population either abstained or voted against a UN Resolution condemning Russia (Cliffe 2022). This desire for neutrality echoes the need to 'hedge bets', with countries reliant on both Russia and the West, again a consequence of economic interconnections. This further repudiates any notion of binary poles of authority and, through retrospective comparison, places emphasis on the relative clarity of the post-Cold War order's US-led unipolarity. In part, the obscurity of the current balance of power can be attributed to the conceptual challenges of contemporary political science, with limited temporal distance from the events in question inhibiting retrospective analysis. Yet, to date, mutual reliance, coupled with diverging capabilities within the West itself and the need for non-aligned parties to seek neutrality, points to the emergence of an increasingly obscure balance of power. This comparatively links the post-Cold War's relative clarity to its balance of power, defined through US unipolarity.

A final point of consideration for this complicated balance of power is the rise of China and its response to Russia's war against Ukraine. Foundationally, China's economic growth, itself intrinsically linked to global economic interconnections, has undermined US hegemony, providing an alternative position for third-party states to align with (Ikenberry 2020, 271). This increased assertiveness and turn toward overt market intervention roughly coincided with Russia's resurgence which marked the end of a unipolar balance of power and the post-Cold War order. During the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Russia sought to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions, signing a \$400 billion deal to export gas to China (Gabuev 2015, 1). This pivot was affirmed in a 2022 meeting between their respective heads of state and has led some to argue that the balance of power shifted toward bipolarity in a 'new cold war' (Eran and Magen 2022). However, an argument for bipolarity overstates the extent to which the two countries are aligned. Despite refusing to condemn Russian action, Chinese-owned telecommunications company Huawei has suspended operations in Russia for fear of secondary US sanctions (Al Jazeera 2022). Not only does this erode the theorised binary bipolarity but also, just as with Russia, it highlights that China cannot fully detach itself from the US-led West's economic reach. Some would therefore claim a transition toward multipolarity⁴. Yet, as explored above, these poles are not clearly defined and separated. Economic interconnectivity and the role of non-aligned states ensure that the current balance of power is better expressed as complex and ill-defined, compared to the multipolar connotation of a neat and binary division of power.

Thus far, it can be seen that Russia's war against Ukraine has both revealed the

³ Described as a 'high-point' for international legislation and cooperation, the post-Cold War period witnessed the signing of supranational treaties such as the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in 2005.

⁴ See, for example, Christopher Layne (2011) 'This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana', *International Studies Quarterly*, 56:1, 203-13

contemporary balance of power and offered a reflection on the nature and temporal parameters of the previous post-Cold War order. This period's encouragement of economic integration led, in the long run, to increased complexity via mutual reliance, multiple possible poles of power and a growing non-aligned majority. Implicitly, and through retrospective comparison, this current lack of clarity contrasts with the post-Cold War's well-defined US unipolarity. Indeed, an analysis of change and continuity, especially with regard to the strength of, substantiates the characterisation of the post-Cold War as a distinct relation of power. This affirms that the apparent liberal ideational dominance was not reflective of universal endorsement, instead proving a consequence of US hegemony. Further, it highlights that the war in Ukraine constitutes the *culmination* of a transition away from this epoch into a period ironically defined by its ill-definition. Put another way, the war highlights the complexity that defines contemporary relations of power, and comparatively characterises the post-Cold War order as a distinctly demarcated power balance. This characteristic temporally prescribed the period. These revelations highlight that although the war against Ukraine has arisen subsequently to the complex international order in question, a comparative and retrospective analysis reveals the nature of both the post-Cold War and contemporary period. This undermines the alternative conceptualisation that the war in Ukraine represents the end of an epoch in and of itself. Yet, beyond just reflecting on the balances of power, the war also offers the opportunity to reflect on the systemic foundations which prescribe them.

FOUNDATIONAL CONSISTENCY

Underlying the episodic transition between the post-Cold War and contemporary international order is a paradoxical and continuous relationship between anarchy and hierarchy. Described as a Hobbesian state of nature, traditional IR theory presents nation-states' pursuit of self-interest within a system of anarchic equality as the foundation of the international order. That said, despite the formal sovereign equality that is enshrined in international law through the UN charter, informal hierarchies continue to persist. Indeed, the relative ability to act 'anarchically' and pursue self-interest is prescribed by one's position within these underlying hierarchies. To stress, continuity within this ordered anarchy does not undermine the aforementioned temporal framework for the transition between epochs. Instead, beneath these shifts in power relations, there is a foundational consistency to the international order's nature, with nation-state action largely determined by their relative hierarchical position, or strength at any given time.

For instance, the war against Ukraine offers a distinctive comparison to the US's 2003 invasion of Iraq. Echoing Schmitt, who defines sovereignty as 'he who decides on the exception' (Benton 2010, 283), the US's then hegemonic position enabled Washington's redefinition of sovereign equality in line with its self-interest. Employing international law, which stemmed from the peace terms of the prior Gulf War, Iraqi sovereignty was made conditional on its upholding of the disarmament obligations of Resolution 678 (Murphy 2004). This 'organised hypocrisy', as Stephen Krasner (1999, 15) describes it, to justify the violation of formal sovereignty, echoes both the constructivist arguments that sovereignty is socially conditioned and contingent, and the poststructuralist ontology that this contingency rests on power. Not only does this affirm that foundational characteristics, including 'sovereignty', are the product of social construction (Biersteker 2002, 245), but the relatively muted opposition to their *ultra vires* action also illustrates that a country's hierarchical position guides its anarchic capacity.

Through a comparison of the Iraq war and the Ukrainian conflict, underlying structural continuity of the international order can be substantiated. Although the US's unopposed dominance has subsided, Washington's competing efforts against the Russians to define Ukrainian sovereignty have persisted. Whilst the US has, albeit hypocritically, affirmed sovereignty through an external and territorially defined parameter, the Kremlin has sought to erode Ukraine's foundational legitimacy. Putin, in a 2021 speech, claimed that Ukrainians had been 'taken away... from their historical motherland' (President of Russia 2021), undermining sovereignty by asserting a shared lineage. Even if the notion of sovereignty has shifted, both the Iraq and Ukrainian wars have been argued along socially constructed parameters. On a

similar point, even if the US's strength has diminished relative to Russia, the capacity to assert definitions of sovereignty remains contingent on hierarchical positioning. Anarchic action and hierarchy are consistently interlinked. Thus, beyond reflecting on current relations of power, the war in Ukraine, through case study comparison, reveals the underlying foundations which frame them. These socially conditioned and informal hierarchies have permeated both the post-Cold War and contemporary international orders, shaping the relative ability to act anarchically.

One particularly consistent informal hierarchy of power that continues to shape the anarchic pursuit of self-interest is that of race. The disparity in the extremity of opposition to Russia's war against Ukraine compared to the US's in Iraq proved a partial consequence of the former targeting white Christian Europeans. Rather than race, one could argue that this disparity is, again, a consequence of material differences in power, with the US retaining the capacity to violate sovereignty. However, the relatively limited opposition to Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria, coinciding with the heightened tension in Ukraine, emphasises that the international concern over the latter assumed a racial dimension. Whilst Russia was expelled from the G8 for annexing Crimea, the subsequent G7 body did not sanction its military support for the Syrian regime which had carried out a chemical attack on its population. This hypocrisy is affirmed by the different linguistic and political reactions to the corresponding refugee influxes. For example, reporters, when analysing Ukrainian refugee movements, have been quoted stating that they 'look like any European family' and that this 'is not a developing, third world nation, this is Europe' (McCloskey 2022, 140). This problematically appropriates a hierarchy to the victims of war, normalising tragedy within other regions whilst sensationalising the plight of white, Christian Ukrainians. Most evidential in exposing underlying racial axes is the replication of this racialised discourse within official policy. The EU's 'Temporary Protection Directive' provided residence to any Ukrainian national for twelve months and led to the assumption of 8.1 million Ukrainians within half a year (Venturi and Vallianatou 2022). The same member states have only permitted one million Syrian refugees, despite the conflict entering a second decade (Hankir and Rabah 2022). Put summarily, in spite of changing surface relations of power, both the post-Cold War and contemporary international orders exhibit underlying continuity through the perpetuated informal hierarchies of race.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, despite falling outside the period under analysis, Russia's war against Ukraine, through retrospective comparison, reveals the nature and temporal parameters of the previous post-Cold War international order. Offering a reflection on change and continuity, it illustrates relations of power and the underlying foundations which prescribe them. The collapse of the Soviet and Eastern Blocs rooted the post-Cold War order's characterising nature in a distinctive balance of power. This period concluded with the instigation of Russian action against Georgia, with the event representing a successfully revanchist Russian operation to reassert Russia within its near-abroad region.

This argument undermines assertions of a liberal ideational consensus and is substantiated by the war in Ukraine. Diverging responses to the 2004 and 2014 revolutions, the latter of which proved a precursor to the 2022 invasion, in spite of contextual continuity, illustrate the key differential to be Russia's relative strength. Ultimately, this points toward the fact that the post-Cold War order did not reflect ideational uniformity, nor did it convey a willing Russian benignity towards its eastern European neighbours. Instead, the previous 'permissiveness', whereby the US-led West encroached into Russia's historical sphere of influence, represented an imbalance of power, with US hegemony complemented by Russian frailty.

Furthermore, the Ukrainian conflict affirms the post-Cold War's nature and temporal scope in comparison to the increasing complexity that defines contemporary relations of power. Stemming from increased economic interconnectivity, the geo-politicisation of the world economy has created a mutual reliance between Russia and Europe, specifically centred on energy security. This has shifted power toward a less defined and binary position, which is further pronounced given the diverging reliance within the West itself, the growth of China

and a non-aligned movement of states. These factors, reflecting a shared vulnerability and the interlinking of power, have, in turn, impeded the clarity of contemporary demarcations. Thus, by affirming the contemporary order's characteristics, the war comparatively highlights the nature and temporal boundaries of the post-Cold War period through clear differentials.

Yet, beyond the comparative illustration of difference, the war against Ukraine has exposed underlying continuities which have guided power relations. Reflecting constructivist and poststructuralist arguments, the war reveals the international order to be both anarchic and structured by socially conditioned hierarchies. The competing definitions of sovereignty offered by Russia and the US relay the socially constructed and hierarchical nature of international order. Given that the assertion of sovereignty definitions proves contingent on one's relative strength, it can be seen that one's hierarchical position prescribes their capacity to act anarchically in their self-interest. This underlying continuity extends beyond the material disparities of power, to that of race. Indeed, the different discursive and political responses to the Ukrainian war, compared to previous conflicts, illustrate a 'hierarchy of victims' along racially determined binaries. Therefore, Russia's war against Ukraine can be seen, via retrospective comparison, to reveal the nature and temporal parameters of the post-Cold War international order. Whilst it emphasises a distinctive transition in the balance and nature of power relations, it also reveals underlying continuity with regard to the order's foundational structure, guided by socially conditioned hierarchies.

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