**The War in Ukraine: Neutralizing Effect of Weaponized Interdependence**

*The theory that interdependence creates peace has a long history but it has not worked in explaining Russia’s offensive against Ukraine or its relations with the West. This paper examines Putin’s calculations prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and introduces the neutralizing effect strategy to the recently developed theory of “weaponized interdependence.” More specifically, I argue that the confidence of Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine despite his awareness that the stakes could go well beyond the borders of Ukraine increasing the cost of war for the Kremlin was based on Putin’s calculations that the West would be reluctant to change or substantially displace established rich-get-richer economic structures and would not apply high costs on the Kremlin for the military aggression against Ukraine in case of a successful blitzkrieg campaign. The study utilizes a three player sequential game analysis to demonstrate how Russia, Ukraine, and the West interacted in decision making taking into account reactions and choices of the other players.*

**Introduction**

Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine despite his full awareness that the West promised to respond by imposing severe economic sanctions and substantially reinforcing the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The West dragged its feet before imposing any costs on Russia in its previous military offensives in Georgia in 2008 or Ukraine in 2014. However, in stark contrast to the way the West handled previous Russian military aggressions, transatlantic partners have stood shoulder to shoulder sending some of their most advanced anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons systems to the Ukrainians. While Putin’s invasion was immoral, it was not irrational, raising a question of the Kremlin’s strategy while preparing for the war with Ukraine.

This paper examines Putin’s calculations prior to this latest offensive and contributes to the newly developed theory of “weaponized interdependence,” which argues that the states that are uniquely positioned in the international networked structures, through which money, goods, and information travel, by having political authority over the central nodes, the so-called network hubs, are able to leverage interdependent relations to coerce their adversaries in the network. Farrell and Newman (2021) identify two strategies through which states can gain powerful advantages from weaponizing interdependence. They can respectively use the panopticon and chokepoint effects of networks. In the panopticon effect, advantaged states rely on their network position to extract informational dominance over adversaries, whereas in the chokepoint effect, they can stop adversaries from accessing network flows.

In this paper, on the example of the Russia’s war against Ukraine, I introduce an additional strategy of weaponized interdependence - neutralizing effect - and argue that advantaged states with jurisdiction over the network hub possess a short window opportunity to use their network position to neutralize its adversaries as potential unwanted third-party participant from the conflict that involves the advantaged state.

More specifically, I argue that the confidence of Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine despite his awareness that the stakes could go well beyond the borders of Ukraine increasing the cost of war for the Kremlin was based on Putin’s calculations that the West would be reluctant to change or substantially displace established rich-get-richer economic structures and would not apply high costs on the Kremlin for the military aggression against Ukraine in case of a successful blitzkrieg campaign.

The remainder of the study is organized as follows: In section one, I develop a theory building from the past literatures. Section two utilizes a three player sequential game analysis to examine how Russia, Ukraine, and the West interacted in decision making taking into account reactions and choices of the other players. Section three covers the nature of economic interdependence between Russia and the West and uncovers the weaknesses of each party that could be weaponized by the advantaged state. Section four focuses on the neutralizing effect of weaponized interdependence by examining the West’s reactions to Russia’s offensive politics for the past two decades. I conclude by discussing how my findings enhance general knowledge in the area of international affairs, global economic networks, international norms, and security studies.

**Theory**

The theory is building on theliterature surrounding Albert Hirschman's (1945/1980) book that lays out the way the asymmetrical dependence of small powers on great powers can give the latter great leverage over the former. This argument has been very influential (Kirshner 1998) and indeed is the basis for Farrell and Newman’s (2021) larger insight that interdependence is not just a constraining effect on the likelihood of war, but can push actors to use trade and finance as coercive tools to get their way without war.

Following Hirschman’s (1978) logic, a country whose trade or investment is dominated by ties to a larger country will, at some point, try to loosen its dependence by cutting or diversifying the ties. Dependent country can widen the room for maneuver because the dominant country carries only some portion of its international economic relations with the country it dominates. As a result, economic disparity leads to disparity of attention that favors the dependent country allowing it to transform an asymmetric relation into a relation of reduced asymmetry. The mechanisms through which such counterforces arise can be different from case to case and range from purely economic reactions to purely political considerations.

At the same time, as suggested by Farrell and Newman (2021), once established, centralized network structures are hard to challenge because of potential costs of changing or substantially displacing existing network structures. As a result, interdependence generates power imbalances among states creating potential to weaponize networks to exploit vulnerabilities of disadvantaged states. The advantaged state can exploit existing economic asymmetry by extracting information (panopticon effect) or cutting their adversaries off from network flows (chokepoint effect).

This research contributes to the existing literature by introducing a new strategy of weaponized interdependence - the neutralizing effect. Without extracting information (panopticon effect) or cutting their adversaries off from network flows (chokepoint effect), the advantaged state can exploit the existing economic asymmetry to neutralize its adversary from an action the latter would have more willingly participated in otherwise. However, because of the tendency of the dependent state to reduce the existing economic asymmetry triggered by economic or political considerations, the neutralizing effect only opens a short window for the advantaged state to reach its goals and keep the dependent state at bay without activating the counterforces reducing the economic dependency regardless of the high costs of doing so. The war in Ukraine provides a great demonstration how an advantaged state could plan a short-term offensive regardless of the awareness that the long-term war would result in high costs in both economic and political spheres.

**Russia’s Calculations in Sequential Game Analysis**

The game theoretical diagram illustrates the logic that an aggressor can easily underestimate the chance that a big great power will not substantially displace existing structures if the small powers, like Ukraine, first “decide” whether to oppose.

The choices of the players are analyzed through a sequential-move game because Russia initiated the war, Ukraine had to respond, and the West had to react to the conflict after the first two players made their moves. The order of play is graphed in a game tree, that shows players, actions, and payoffs. Players need to think how their current actions will influence future actions, both for their rivals and for themselves and use information about payoffs when deciding among the various actions available to them.

The payoffs in the game are presented without uncertainties because Russia had clarity of the West’s response to its decision to invade Ukraine. Being presented with Russia’s demands to roll back from Eastern Europe, NATO faced an escalation dilemma in the form of a choice between credibly threatening painful consequences for jeopardizing NATO membership or compelling Russia to reverse its behavior threatening Ukraine with all the risks and costs of doing so. NATO’s decision to protect its allies left Ukraine at Russia’s mercy (Roth 2021).

For convenience, for this game tree, I use the payoff structure developed by The Costs of War Project[[1]](#footnote-1), a team of over 50 scholars, legal experts, human rights practitioners, and physicians, facilitating debate about the costs of the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the related violence in Pakistan and Syria. The Project divides the costs of war into three parts accounting for human, economic, and political costs. The payoffs are numerical, and for each player a higher number means a better outcome.

Figure 1 shows the game tree for the three players - Russia, Ukraine, and the West - in their calculations whether to enter or do not enter the conflict. The rules of the game give the first move to Russia, which is shown at the top point or the initial node. At this node, Russia had two choices available to it. Russia’s possible choices are labeled “Enter” and “Don’t Enter” the conflict. If Russia had chosen the outcome of not invading Ukraine (labeled as “Don’t Enter”), in its perception, it would have had lost political influence over Ukraine. Putin has viewed Ukraine as part of Russia’s [“sphere of influence”](https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/strengthening-russias-influence-in-international-affairs-part-ii-russia-and-its-neighbors-a-sphere-of-influence-or-a-declining-relationship/) – a territory, rather than an independent state (Kulakevich 2022). Russia, however, would not have had lost financially or encountered any human losses. Therefore, the payoff for not entering the war against Ukraine is -1.

Figure 1. An Illustrative Game Tree

**RUSSIA**

Enter

Don’t Enter

**UKRAINE**

**(-1)**

Fight

Not Fight

**WEST**

**WEST**

Enter

Don’t Enter

Enter

Don’t Enter

**(2,-3,-2)**

**(-3,-1, -1)**

**(1,-2, -1)**

**(2,-2,-2)**

In its calculations to invade Ukraine, Russia had to think how its actions would influence the actions of Ukraine and the West and compare whether the outcome of not starting the conflict would be bigger or smaller than other options. Suppose Russia had decided to initiate the war with Ukraine and Ukraine had not responded[[2]](#footnote-2) (labeled as “Don’t Fight”) leading to Ukraine’s quick defeat in a short blitz campaign. Such scenario does not appear unfounded. Numerous interviews with Russian captives which have been circulating on Ukrainian social media provide evidence of the assumption in Moscow that the “special military operation” in Ukraine would be fast and successful. The videos suggest that Russian soldiers were given food and fuel supplies for only two or three days and expected that Ukrainians would welcome them as liberators (Harding 2022). After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine’s western region generally supported integration with Western Europe. The country’s eastern side favored closer ties with Russia. Russian belief that Ukrainians would welcome them, however, appeared unfounded as Russia’s military aggression in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 have galvanized public support for Ukraine’s Western leanings. In September 2021, 81% of Ukrainians said they have a negative attitude about Putin, according to the Ukrainian news site RBC-Ukraine (Kulakevich 2022). Ukrainian army also found in Irpin (a suburb of Kyiv) warehouses with Russian parade uniform suggesting that the invading army planned to organize a large parade in Kyiv to celebrate their victory in Ukraine. Blitzkrieg failed but the expectations of Russia in the scenario when Ukraine does not respond to Russia’s offensive were not to lose human lives and gain both economic and political influence over Ukraine giving it a payoff of 2. Ukraine, on the other hand, would have lost in political and economic aspects, but would have preserved human lives receiving a payoff of -2.

The payoffs for Russia and Ukraine in case of the lack of Ukraine’s response were still to be influenced by the decision-making of the West, which had two options - to enter or do not enter the conflict. As a third party, the West could also decide between physically entering the conflict and the application of sanctions, which could be heavy or weak. After publicly declaring that the NATO would be protecting the NATO territory and leaving the Ukraine at Russia’s mercy, the most likely response from the West in this game would be weak sanctions. Sanctions, while a form of intervention, are generally viewed as a lower-cost, lower-risk course of action between diplomacy and war and have been the defining feature of the Western response to many geopolitical challenges and countries, including North Korea, Iran, Venezuela and many others. In addition, sanctions have been the go-to tool when the West wanted to “do something” about Russia, and most of the penalties over the past decade have been economically minor and ineffective at changing Russian policy (Fishman and Miller 2022).

The option for the West to completely ignore Russia’s actions was an unlikely scenario as it would have demonstrated the lack of interest by the West in Russia’s violation of international norms of behavior, potentially exposing the West to economic and political risks, and encouraging Russia to proceed with its plans without incurring any costs. The payoff for inaction for the West, therefore, is higher than for imposing sanctions against Russia’s offensive against Ukraine. In case of inaction, the West receives a payoff of -2 as it loses politically and financially but does not incur human costs. If the West imposes sanctions, it still incurs economic costs due to potential Russian counter-sanctions and Europe’s heavy energy dependency on Russia. The West’s payoff in this case is -1. The Ukrainian payoff in this case is not affected by the West’s decision because it gets occupied by Russia regardless of the West’s response to the Russia’s offensive against Ukraine. In case of the Western sanctions, Russia’s payoff, however, decreases from 2 to 1, which is still a better payoff for Russia, in its perspective, than for not invading Ukraine.

In the scenario when Ukraine defends its territory, the payoff for Ukraine still remains negative, but potentially less costly than for not responding to Russia’s offensive but only in case of the West’s decision not to ignore the Russian aggression against Ukraine. This is because Ukraine would have lost all three components including human lives and would have received a payoff of -3. Interestingly, pre-war polls in Ukraine showed that 57.5%[[3]](#footnote-3) of Ukrainians were ready to offer armed resistance or expressed the readiness to resist by participating in civil resistance to defend their country against a Russian invasion. Also, five days before Russia launched the war against Ukraine, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy stated Ukraine’s resolve to defend itself with or without Western partners (“Zelenskiy Says” 2022). While these results and declarations came out amidst the West’s warnings of potential sanctions against Russia in case of military aggression against Ukraine (Garland 2022), the real scale of the West’s support to Ukraine was still to be seen. The payoff for Russia in case of Ukrainian resistance and absence of the West’s reaction amounts to 2 due to human losses, but political and financial gains. The West’s inaction brings it a payoff of -2, similarly to its inaction move when Ukraine does not defend itself.

The war of Russia against Ukraine went according to the last possible scenario in the game tree, when Ukraine chose to defend itself and the West made the decision to provide support to Ukraine. Such scenario gives the worst payoff for Russia. Expert predictions varied based on calculating risks for Russia. Many viewed a full-scale invasion as unlikely as Russia didn’t have enough force to conquer and control all of Ukraine while the benefits of such an endeavor would be spoiled by its costs. Any calculations were based on rational thinking, and still Russia made the decision to invade Ukraine.

The Kremlin miscalculated but, even knowing that this layout gives the best payoff for Ukraine and for the West after Ukraine makes its move, the strategy with the lowest payoff for Russia was perceived by Putin as the scenario with the payoff higher than the one for not invading Ukraine. After starting the war, based on potential costs and payoffs, the game demonstrates that Putin likely banked on Kyiv falling quickly and/or counted on the West’s reluctance to impose heavy costs on Russia and/or provide substantial support to Ukraine.

Putin’s calculations to engage in a full-scale invasion against Ukraine demonstrate the need to merge the literatures on global markets and international security. The common rhetoric on globalization suggesting greater economic exchange reduces the potential for conflict has been challenged by Russia’s interest to manipulate the power asymmetries of complex interdependence by Putin’s plan to push the West into the role of a neutral observer of Russia’s efforts in Ukraine.

Putin was not alone in his misjudgment of the Ukrainian resolve to fight for their land. In March 2022, top US intelligence officials admitted that they also underestimated Ukraine’s ability to defend itself against Russia’s invasion (Merchant 2022). When it comes to sanctioning Russia, Putin was aware that in the past the West faced a recurring challenge: the most impactful sanctions would be economically costly to the West.

**Nature of Economic Interdependence between Russia and the West**

I conceptualize economic interdependence as mutual dependence of the participants in an economic system, whose trading relationship of the goods they cannot produce efficiently for themselves would be costly to rupture. Economic dependency within networks between Russia and the West appears more pronounced in some sectors more than others depending on the countries’ needs, opening opportunities for the advantaged states to weaponize existing relationships in their interests. While European countries have been heavily dependent on Russia’s oil, gas and raw materials, the US has been heavily relying on Russia’s uranium. Russia’s “weak” spot appeared to be high technology goods.

***Russia’s Economic Dependency on the West***

Russia’s economy is greatly intertwined with other economies in the world with the EU and the US together supplying 42.2% of Russian total imports[[4]](#footnote-4). In 2020, the EU was Russia’s main supplier of foreign goods, accounting for 36.5% of Russian total imports, significantly more than China which represents 23%.

Russia’s trade profile is one in which Russia exports minerals, oil, and gas and imports manufacturing products. In 2020, exports of minerals, oil, and gas represented 59% of Russian total exports, 37.9% of these exports went to the EU. Besides energy exports, Russia is one of the biggest exporters of raw materials to Europe having monopoly of supply for certain countries. For example, being the sixth-largest exporter of gold, accounting for 4.4% of the world’s supply, it exports 85.7% of gold to the UK. Russia also covers about 3.5% of global demand for copper, 94.3% of which goes to Netherlands and Germany, which ranked as 2nd (7.4%) and 4th (5.5%) main export markets for Russia in 2020[[5]](#footnote-5). Russia also accounts for 10% of the world’s supply of nickel, which is used to make stainless steel and vehicle batteries and exports 99.9% of it to Netherlands. Such lack of diversification underscores the dilemma certain Western governments face in seeking to punish Russia without hurting their own access to key commodities. For example, so far, an oligarch chief executive of Nornickel, a Russian nickel and [palladium](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palladium) mining and smelting company, Vladimir Potanin, also a former Russian deputy prime minister under Boris Yeltsin, has been included only in the British sanctions list. His companies Nornickel and Interros with large stakes in mining, metals, energy, finance, retail, real estate and other sectors have not been sanctioned or affected by the personal sanctions against their owner.

In terms of imports, the Russian economy relies heavily on EU and US companies for many imported products. In 2020, there were 1,716 product categories (out of 4,385) amounting to 28% of Russian total imports for which at least half of Russia’s imports came from the EU and the US (Erixon, Guinea, Sharma, and Zilli 2022). Some of the most important product categories are medicines, vehicles parts, IT components, machinery’s parts like valves and pipes, and iron and steel. Russia is highly reliant on imports of high-tech goods. In 2019, the largest share (45%) came from the EU, with 21% from the US, 11% from China and 2% from the United Kingdom. Being the largest supplier of medical goods in the world followed by the US, the EU is the main provider of medical goods to Russia. Biotechnology and life science products are the largest categories of high-tech imports to Russia and the EU accounts for roughly 60% of these imports. In 2019, the EU also exported 68% of nuclear technology to Russia and the US accounted for over 60% of aerospace technology (Marcus, Poitiers, Grzegorczyk, and Weil 2022). Heavy dependence on the West’s high-technology explains the financial and technological sanctions the West imposed on Russia shortly after President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale war in Ukraine. The sanctions block Russia’s access to the advanced technology its economy needs (Ringhof 2022).

***EU’s Energy Dependency on Russia***

In 2021, Russia was the largest natural gas-exporting country in the world and the second-largest crude oil and condensates-exporting country after Saudi Arabia. Even though the EU has worked on a common energy policy to strengthen its energy security and the internal energy market ever since the gas disruptions that hit some eastern EU countries in the winters of 2006 and 2009 when Russia cut off gas supplies to Europe while clashing over gas prices with Ukraine, the war in Ukraine exposed the EU’s heavy energy dependency on Russia. Energy represented 62% of EU total imports from Russia. Such influence over energy exports has given the Kremlin an ability to disrupt global oil and gas markets and a reason to believe he could avoid harsh punishment had he decided to invade Ukraine or undertaken major efforts to destabilize the Ukrainian government.

In 2021, the EU imported 27% of oil and 46% of coal from Russia, just over 4% of Russia’s oil exports went to the United States. Shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in March 2022, the US banned imports of Russian oil and gas into the US, trying to deprive Moscow of revenue after its invasion of Ukraine. The move was matched by a UK phase-out of Russian oil imports, however, the EU managed to agree on gradual reduction of Russia’s oil imports only in June 2022. The EU’s sixth package of sanctions includes a partial embargo on Russian oil. The sanctions banned seaborne imports of Russian crude oil as of December 5, 2022, and will ban petroleum product imports as of February 5, 2023.

The EU is even more dependent on Russia’s gas making up as much as 40% of the region’s natural gas supplies and prompting fears about what might happen if Moscow cuts off some or all of that supply. In 2021, almost one-fifth of Russia’s total gas exports (19%) went to Germany alone, making it the top individual recipient for the year. Next were Turkey at 11% and Italy at 10%. Germany and France were increasingly criticized in June 2022 for being too reluctant to cut ties with Russia and even going as far as suggesting the two were trying to appease Russian President Vladimir Putin (Noyan 2022; Kottasova 2022). However, determined to reduce gas dependency on Russia, in late July 2020, the EU members managed to approve a draft European law designed to voluntarily reduce 15% of gas use between August 2022 and March 2023 with some countries receiving exemptions to avoid rationing.

In addition, in many instances, Putin has seen that some leading Western politicians align with Russia contributing to the divisions of Western countries away from forging a unified front to Putin. For example, former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, advocated for strategic cooperation between Europe and Russia while he was in office from 1998 to 2005. He later joined Russian oil company Rosneft as chairman in 2017 and, in August 2022, criticized the war in Ukraine but refused to condemn Putin, whom he still calls a close personal friend. Other senior European politicians promoting a soft position toward Russia while in office include former French Prime Minister François Fillon and former Austrian foreign minister Karin Kneissl. Both joined the boards of Russian state-owned companies after leaving office.

***US’s Uranium Dependency on Russia***

The Russia’s war against Ukraine exposed a lesser-known link between Russia and the United States: the nuclear fuel supply. In March 2022, President Biden announced sanctions on Russia’s energy exports, specifically oil and gas. But one notable export was left off of that list: uranium. Ninety five percent of the uranium that fuels US power plants is imported, and Russia is the third-largest supplier[[6]](#footnote-6).

Besides producing 5.9% of the global uranium supply in 2020, Russia accounted for nearly 40% of global conversion services and has the world’s largest uranium enrichment complex, accounting for almost half (46%) the global capacity[[7]](#footnote-7). The vast majority of the 439 reactors around the world require enriched uranium fuel, including all reactors in the US. Russia is also currently the world’s only viable commercial supplier of high-assay low-enriched uranium (HALEU), the necessary fuel for many advanced nuclear power reactors rapidly emerging in the US and the rest of the world. In 2021, Russia provided US nuclear utilities with 14% of their uranium purchases and 28% of their enrichment services. The high level of Russian enriched uranium in US nuclear fuel has a unique history that explains how the United States got to where it is today in terms of diminished domestic capabilities. In 1993, Russia and the US signed an agreement to eliminate excess highly enriched uranium (HEU) from dismantled Russian nuclear weapons. From 1993 to 2013, as part of the “Megatons to Megawatts” program, Russian HEU provided about half of the enriched uranium used in US power reactors.

The United States is not alone in its dependence on Russia's uranium. Some of the EU countries - Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary and Slovakia - have old Soviet-built reactors operated on their territory, all entirely reliant on fuel supplied by Russian state-owned Rosatom company. In 2020, EU utilities imported 20% of their natural uranium and 26% of their enrichment services from Russia. Sanctioning Rosatom’s Paris-based subsidiary is an especially sensitive question for the French President Emmanuel Macron. France has a large nuclear power sector and [collaborates closely with Rosatom](https://www.lefigaro.fr/societes/nucleaire-l-etat-pret-a-ceder-20-d-arabelle-au-russe-rosatom-20220308) (Moens, Weise, Hernandez, and Kijewski 2022).

Combined, annual US and EU uranium imports earn Russia $1 billion per year. This is small in comparison to Russia’s earnings of about $200 billion per year from oil and natural gas exports. But ending the US and EU imports of nuclear services from Russia would make them less subject to its blackmail over energy.

Before the war in Ukraine began, the US government had been taking steps to reduce Russian involvement in US nuclear fuel markets. In 2020, in the most recent amendment to “the Russian suspension agreement” originally signed on October 16, 1992, the US Department of Commerce and the Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom agreed to lower the amount of Russian uranium products allowed for export into the US market, and to limit the percentage of US enrichment demand met by Russia to 15% starting in 2028. The Energy Act of 2020 established the Advanced Nuclear Fuel Availability Program in the US Department of Energy (DOE) is also intended to stimulate the domestic development of a commercial HALEU supply chain, particularly uranium enrichment capacity. Recent events in Ukraine have reinforced the imperative of funding and moving forward with the DOE HALEU program due to the high political risks of relying on Russian HALEU supply.

**Neutralizing Effect of Weaponized Interdependence**

Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine is connected to a sense of impunity. For two decades, by being aware of mutual dependence in economic system with the West and realizing that it would be costly for the West to rupture the established relationshipin various economic sectors, the Russian Government managed to violate human rights and international laws without incurring major costs by neutralizing the West from the unwanted actions. The so-called “special operation in Ukraine”in Putin’s handbook supposed to be another “achievement” whilethe Westshould have been preoccupied with its interests in preserving rich-get-richer economic structures. Such Putin’s calculations, however, did not account for a firm desire of the Ukrainians to fight for their country and the inability of the West to ignore the prolonged conflict disrupting the global order.

Right before coming to power in 2000, in 1999, Vladimir Putin ordered the complete destruction of the Chechen capital of Grozny, killing tens of thousands of civilians. That was the Second Chechen War when Moscow sent forces to put down armed and political movements in Chechnya aimed at seceding from Russia. In 2003, the United Nation called Grozny “the most destroyed city on earth.” In response, the Clinton administration focused on cementing its relationship with the new Russian President Putin, the prime architect of the abusive campaign in Chechnya. Secretary of State Madeline Albright traveled to Moscow and criticized Russia’s conduct in Chechnya, but said there was no point in considering economic sanctions against Russia (Traynor 2000).

Many poisonings by the Kremlin during Putin’s 21-year reign have been either ignored by the West or received with muted response even though many of such cases made international headlines. An early example was the 2004 attack on the Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko. Then came the 2006 polonium killing of Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko in the heart of London. The Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was killed not far from the Kremlin in February 2015. Yet, only the 2018 operation in Salisbury against former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and the 2020 poisoning of a leading political activist Alexei Navalny were followed by the limited Western response. European countries and the United States expelled Russian diplomats after each attack. The White House blocked international financial institutions such as the World Bank from lending to governments subject to US sanctions for using chemical or nuclear weapons. The response showed how reluctant Western nations were to escalate tensions with Russia (Dettmer 2021).

It took years of international campaigning after the death of Sergei Magnitsky in 2009, a tax advisor responsible for exposing corruption and misconduct by Russian government officials, to pass the original Magnitsky Act in 2012 that allowed Washington to impose targeted sanctions on individuals in Russia accused of human rights violations. In 2015, the United States adopted the Global Magnitsky Act that extended the same penalties to alleged rights abusers in other countries.

The Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008 not only demonstrated the lengths Moscow was prepared to go to in order to prevent countries that it considers to be its sphere of influence, but also highlighted the lack of interest in the West to impose costs on Russia. Russia occupied 20 percent of Georgian territory and got away with it. The international reaction to Russia’s military campaign in Georgia that lasted a few days was muted with Moscow suffering few negative consequences (Bowker 2011). The ceasefire agreement brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy was in favor of Moscow as it meant to open the way for subsequent negotiations toward a political settlement on South Ossetia, where Russia initiated this war against Georgia. The subsequent EU report about the five-day war (incorrectly) blamed Georgia for firing the first shots (Barry 2009). Days after the ceasefire in Georgia, the Bush administration rejected Tbilisi’s request for anti-tank and air defense weapons. The US under the new Obama administration was soon calling for a reset in relations with the Kremlin.

Six years after the Russo-Georgian War, in 2014, Russia embarked on a more comprehensive military campaign against Ukraine. Russian involvement was deliberately ambiguous, such as the use of troops in unmarked military uniforms, in order to confuse and forestall any international response. As with the previous Russia’s behavior, the West continued their reactions with reserve. Initially, sanctions against Russia did not impact Russia directly and primarily targeted its dealings with Crimea after it annexed the former Ukrainian territory. These sanctions targeted individuals and entities involved in the annexation, as well as anyone wishing to do business in or with Crimea. After Russia continued to intervene in Eastern Ukraine, ending up shooting down a Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) and killing 283 passengers and 15 crew, both the US and the EU started targeting state-owned banks, imposed an arms embargo and restricted sales of sensitive technology and the export of equipment for the Russia’s oil industry. Although these sanctions impose costs on Russia, they did not force it to retreat from its positions.

The war in Syria further emboldened Russia and its relentless targeting of civilians in Ukraine. Moscow’s decision to intervene militarily in Syria in 2015 preserved the Assad regime in Damascus. A UN investigation into atrocities committed in Syria accused Russia of direct involvement in war crimes for indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas.While the US enacted the Caesar sanctions[[8]](#footnote-8) in 2019, no sanctions against Russia specifically materialized and the sanctions efficacy against Syrian regime officials has been questioned (Armbruster 2022).

Again, Western countries imposed mostly symbolic sanctions against Russia over its interference in the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections and a huge cyberattack against about 18,000 people who work for companies and the U.S. government, among other transgressions. The sanctions following the 2016 meddling were introduced in 2018 and targeted 15 members of a Russian military intelligence service and four entities involved in the alleged election interference. The 2021 sanctions barred US financial institutions from buying rouble bonds, targeted six Russian cybersecurity companies deemed to be involved in the SolarWinds hack, as well as 32 individuals and entities deemed to be involved in efforts to influence the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election and were the considered the toughest US sanctions at that point (Roth and Borger 2021).

No Western reaction could be observed in Russia’s preparations to use Belarus as a launchpad for Russia’s assault on Ukraine. At the beginning of February 2022, Russia held its largest military exercise since the Cold War with Belarus, when 30,000 Russian troops, elite special forces units, Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 missile systems were stationed in Belarus close to the Ukrainian border. Russian soldiers did not leave the territory of Belarus after large-scale joint drills were completed. The reaction of the US and NATO countries regarding the timing and the position of the military exercise was limited to the expression of concerns. Similar reaction of the West manifested in 2020 when Russia’s external forces improved the odds of Lukashenka’s authoritarian survival by providing financial support to the regime and allowing it to reinforce its coercive apparatus (Kulakevich and Augsburger 2021).

Reserved reactions from the West to Russia’s violations of human rights and international law for over two decades suggest that Putin’s expectations that he could get away with another, even larger, aggression against Ukraine with low costs especially also counting on blitzkrieg, were not unfounded. Three weeks ahead of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, media widely reported the US expectations that Ukraine was expected to fall within 72 hours in case of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (Heinrich and Sabes 2022).

Moreover, the economic response to Russia’s invasion and military support to Ukraine has been gradual and slow. For example, Germany suspended certification of Nord Stream 2[[9]](#footnote-9) and forced the energy companies involved in Nord Stream 2 to accept big financial losses on the project only after Russia’s fateful decision to formally recognize two pro-Russian, breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine, which served as a precursor for the full-scale invasion. As Russia has maintained its assault on Ukraine, the West continues to gradually escalate its responses, coordinating on a number of increasingly impactful sanctions designed to strangle the Russian economy. To date, the EU has imposed seven packages of sanctions against Russia since the beginning of the Russia’s war against Ukraine.

The West is largely united in supporting Ukraine militarily. But, same as with sanctions, it has been gradually increasing the quantity and quality of the equipment. For example, initially the only military aid Germany promised to send Ukraine was a shipment of 5,000 helmets. In spring 2022, Germany was criticized for weapons delays, and the first heavy weapons from Germany arrived in Ukraine in late June 2022. After receiving longer-range artillery, like the American-made High Mobility Artillery Rocket System or HIMARS, Ukraine has been able to slow Russia’s advance.

Having sustained heavy losses of troops and equipment in its failed assault on the capital, Kiev, Russia appears to have scaled back its objectives to change the regime in Ukraine on the grounds of “de-Nazification” to consolidating its position in the eastern Donbas region and establishing a land corridor connecting Russia to Crimea.

**Conclusion**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shocked much of the world. It has taken thousands of lives, and caused a lot of spillover effects, including food shortages in Africa, the greatest humanitarian and energy crises in Europe and many others. This new reality not only reflects the current state of affairs, but also recognizes how we got here.

Energy interdependence between the West and Russia that has been developing for decades has demonstrated a great endurance potential but also exposed a vulnerability of the West that could be exploited by the Kremlin indirectly without the need to extract information (panopticon effect) or cut off its adversaries from network flows (chokepoint effect). By relying on the established networks and realizing the difficulty for economic actors to change or substantially displace them, the Russian Government has relied on these interdependence networks as a shield to avoid large costs for violating human rights and international norms. Such strategy has been neutralizing the West from deeper involvement in the abuses of international norms by Russia.

This observation allowed to add an additional layer to the debate between economic interdependence and international security. Theoretically, this study shows that besides shaping power relations, established networks can also allow an advantaged state to isolate its adversaries from unwanted actions while pursuing its interests with the party outside the network without directly targeting its adversaries and undermining the features of the preexisting system.

This research also contributes to the study of international norms and foreign policy. Norms have clearly entered decision-maker thinking, but the complexity of real-world events creates a gray area about when norms apply, or when multiple norms conflict. The war in Ukraine demonstrated a potential critical point after which violations of international norms cannot be ignored. Until the full-scale war in Ukraine, Western states were willing to accept Russia’s behavior, when it was disrespecting international norms, because of shared economic interests. The prolonged nature of the fighting, losses of lives, and unprecedented number of violations of human rights and torture set a critical point that cannot be ignored to preserve the existing economic networks.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has seized the attention of the world and raised the costs for rival powers and adversaries to remain in existing, previously enduring, network structures. At least in the long run, diversification within network structures should limit the coercive capacity of the Russian Government to manipulate economic structures in its interests and force it to pay a high price for painting the town red.

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1. The details about The Costs of War Project can be found on their website: https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/about [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Don’t Fight” decision could be motivated by the decision not to lose human lives, preserve infrastructure etc. An example of such decision could be the annexation of Crimea. When Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014 little was done to stop it, or to actively help Ukraine to get its territory back. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. Results of a telephone survey conducted on February 5-13, 2022. https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1099&page=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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7. Euratom Supply Agency (ESA). Annual Report. <https://euratom-supply.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/MJAA21001ENN_002.pdf> Accessed August 15, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, also known as the Caesar Act, is [United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) legislation that sanctions the [Syrian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria) government, including [Syrian president](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_Syria) [Bashar al-Assad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bashar_al-Assad), for [war crimes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_crime) against the Syrian population. The Act was signed into law by [President Trump](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Trump) in December 2019, and came into force on June 17, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nord Stream 2 is the controversial $11 billion gas pipeline set to increase supply from Russia to Germany through the North Sea bypassing Ukraine. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)