

# Destroying Ukraine with Idealism

## Why Ukraine should not have the “right” to join NATO

by Glenn Diesen,\* Norway



Glenn Diesen.  
(Picture ma)

*Political realism is commonly and mistakenly portrayed as immoral because the principal focus is on the inescapable security competition and it thus rejects idealist efforts to transcend power politics. Because states cannot break with security*

*competition, morality for the realist entails acting in accordance with the balance of power logic as the foundation for stability and peace. Idealist efforts to break with power politics can then be defined as immoral by undermining the management of security competition as the foundation of peace. As Raymond Aron expressed in 1966: “The idealist, believing he has broken with power politics exaggerates its crimes”.<sup>1</sup>*

### Ukraine’s Sovereign Right to join NATO

The most appealing and dangerous idealist argument that destroyed Ukraine is that it has the right to join any military alliance it desires. It is a very attractive statement that can easily win support from the public as it affirms the freedom and sovereignty of Ukraine, and the alternative is seemingly that Russia should be allowed to dictate Ukraine’s policies.

However, arguing that Ukraine should be allowed to join any military alliance is an idealist argument as it appeals to how we would like the world to be, not how the world actually works. The principle that peace derives from expanding military alliances without taking into account the security interests of other great powers has never existed. States such as Ukraine that border a great power have every reason to express legitimate security concerns, but inviting a rival great

power such as the US into its territory intensifies the security competition.

Is it moral to insist on how the world ought to be when war is the consequence of ignoring how the world actually works?

The alternative to expanding NATO is not to accept a Russian *sphere of influence*, which denotes a zone of exclusive influence. Peace derives from recognising a Russian *sphere of interests*, which is an area where Russian security interests must be recognised and incorporated rather than excluded. It did not use to be controversial to argue that Russian security interests must be taken into account when operating on its borders. This is why Europe had a belt of neutral states as a buffer between East and West during the Cold War to mitigate the security competition.

Mexico has plenty of freedoms in the international system, but it does not have the freedom to join a Chinese-led military alliance or to host Chinese military bases. The idealist argument that Mexico can do as it pleases implies ignoring US security concerns, and the result would likely be the US destruction of Mexico. If Scotland secedes from the UK and then joins a Russian-led military alliance and hosts Russian missiles, would the English still champion the principle that it has no say?

When we live in a realist world and recognise that security competition must be mitigated for peace, then we accept a security system based on mutual constraints. When we live in the idealist world of good states versus evil states, then the force for good should not be constrained. Peace is then ensured when the good defeats evil, and compromise is mere appeasement. Idealists who seek to transcend power politics and create a more benign world thus find themselves intensifying the security competition and instigating wars.

### The Morality of Opposing NATO Expansionism

To argue that NATO expansionism provoked Russia’s invasion is regularly condemned by idealists as immoral because it allegedly legitimises both

\* Glenn Diesen is Professor of Political Science at the University of Southeast Norway. His research focuses on geoeconomics, conservatism, Russian foreign policy and Greater Eurasia.  
On the author see also: <https://braveneweuropa.com/glenn-diesen-this-is-why-the-west-is-really-doomed>

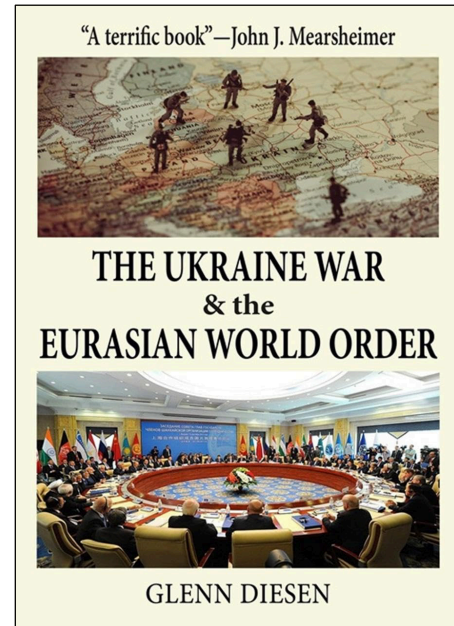
power politics and the invasion. Is objective reality immoral if it contradicts the ideal world we would like to exist?

The former British ambassador to Russia, Roderic Lyne, warned in 2020 that it was a “massive mistake” to push for NATO membership for Ukraine: “If you want to start a war with Russia, that’s the best way of doing it.”<sup>2</sup> *Angela Merkel* acknowledged that Russia would interpret the possibility of Ukrainian NATO membership as a “declaration of war”.<sup>3</sup> CIA Director *William Burns* also warned against drawing Ukraine into NATO as Russia fears encirclement and will therefore be under enormous pressure to use military force: “Russia would have to decide whether to intervene; a decision Russia does not want to have to face”.<sup>4</sup> The advisor to former French President *Sarkozy* argued that the US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership in November 2021 “convinced Russia that they must attack or be attacked”.<sup>5</sup> None of the aforementioned people sought to legitimise an invasion, rather they sought to avoid a war. Yet, heeding their warning is condemned as giving Russia a veto, while ignoring these warnings is depicted as principled and virtuous.

When great powers do not have a soft institutional veto, they use a hard military veto. The idealists insisting that Russia should not have a veto on NATO expansion pushed for the policies that predictably resulted in the loss of territory, hundreds of thousands of deaths, and a nation destroyed. Why do the idealists get to present themselves as moral and “pro-Ukrainian”? Why are the realists who for more than a decade warned against NATO expansion immoral and “anti-Ukrainian”? Are these labels premised on the theoretical assumption of the idealists?

### **NATO as a Third Party?**

Suggesting that Ukraine has the sovereign right to join NATO presents the military bloc as a passive third party that merely supports the democratic aspiration of Ukrainians. This narrative neglects that NATO did not have an obligation to offer future membership to Ukraine. Indeed, the Western countries signed several agreements with Moscow after the Cold War, such as the *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, to collectively construct a Europe without dividing lines and based on indivisible security. NATO broke these agreements by pushing for expansion and refusing to offer Russia security guar-



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antees to mitigate the security competition. By offering future membership to Ukraine, NATO shifted the pressure to Ukraine and the NATO-Russia conflict became a Russia-Ukraine conflict. Russia had to prevent Ukraine from joining the military bloc and hosting the US military on its territory.

NATO’s support for Ukraine’s right to choose its own foreign policy is also dishonest as Ukraine had to be pulled into the orbit of the military bloc against its will. The Western public is rarely informed that every opinion poll between 1991 and 2014 demonstrates that only a very small minority of Ukrainians ever wanted to join the alliance.

NATO recognised the lack of interest by the Ukrainian government and people as a problem to be overcome in a report from 2011: “The greatest challenge for Ukrainian-NATO relations lies in the perception of NATO among the Ukrainian people. NATO membership is not widely supported in the country, with some polls suggesting that popular support of it is less than 20%”.<sup>6</sup>

The solution was to push for a “democratic revolution” in 2014 that toppled the democratically elected government of Ukraine in violation of its constitution and without majority support from Ukrainians. The leaked *Nuland-Pyatt* phone call revealed that the US was planning a regime change, including who should be in the post-coup government, who had to stay out, and how to legitimise the coup.<sup>7</sup>

After the coup, the US openly asserted its intrusive influence over the new government it had installed in Kiev. The general prosecutor of

Ukraine, *Viktor Shokin*, complained that since 2014, “the most shocking thing is that all the [government] appointments were made in agreement with the United States” and Washington “believed that Ukraine was their fiefdom”.<sup>8</sup> A conflict with Russia could be manufactured that would create a demand for NATO.

What were the first decisions of the new government hand-picked by Washington? The first decree by the new Parliament was a call for repealing Russian as a regional language. The “New York Times” reports that on the first day following the coup, Ukraine’s new spy chief called the CIA and MI6 to establish a partnership for covert operations against Russia that eventually resulted in 12 secret CIA bases along the Russian border.<sup>9</sup> The conflict intensified as Russia responded by seizing Crimea and supporting a rebellion in Donbas, and NATO sabotaged the *Minsk peace agreement* that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians voted to have implemented.

Preserving and intensifying the conflict gave Washington a dependent Ukrainian proxy that could be used against Russia. The same “New York Times” article mentioned above, also revealed that the covert war against Russia after the coup was a leading reason for Russia’s invasion:

“Toward the end of 2021, according to a senior European official, Mr. *Putin* was weighing whether to launch his full-scale invasion when he met with the head of one of Russia’s main spy services, who told him that the C.I.A., together with Britain’s MI6, were controlling Ukraine and turning it into a beachhead for operations against Moscow.”<sup>10</sup>

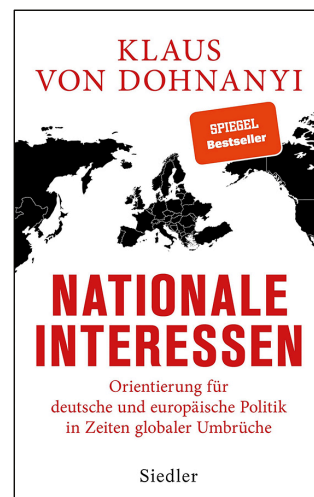
### The Immorality of Peace vs Morality of War?

After Russia’s “unprovoked” invasion of Ukraine, the idealists insist that Ukraine must become a member of NATO as soon as the war is over. It is intended as an appealing and moral statement to ensure that Ukraine will be protected and such a tragedy will not be repeated.

Yet, what does it communicate to Russia? Whatever territory Russia does not conquer will fall into the hands of NATO, which can then be used as a frontline against Russia. The threat of

NATO expansion incentivises Russia to seize as much territory as possible and ensure what remains is a deeply dysfunctional rump state. The only thing that can bring peace to Ukraine and end the carnage is to restore its neutrality, yet the idealists denounce this as deeply immoral and thus unacceptable. To repeat *Raymond Aron*: “The idealist, believing he has broken with power politics exaggerates its crimes.”<sup>11</sup>

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