

Ukraine was never a vital interest of the West, until Putin's imperialist fascism made it so.

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THE CONVERSATION

President Joe Biden and NATO allies in Europe are trying to help Ukraine fight off Russian aggression—but not so much that Russia will retaliate militarily against them.

These leaders' deliberations and calibrations are all taking place against a fundamental background question: Is Ukraine a vital interest to my country?

*The answer to that question—what's a vital interest?—has guided the formation of Western foreign policy for generations now. It's a commonly held belief among political analysts that countries should prioritize and defend what are known as their *vital, strategic or core national interests*.*

The war was the culmination of Putin's imperialist aspirations, just as World War II was the culmination of Hitler's and not the product of some putative threat to Germany from Poland, France or the Jews.

The claim seems eminently sensible. If moral concerns over human rights are excluded from the equation, it surely makes no sense to spill blood over non-vital, nonstrategic, peripheral interests.

It follows that, if Ukraine is a vital interest, the United States and its European allies should help it resist the Russian invasion and prevail. If Ukraine is not, then they shouldn't, to any significant degree in any case.

*Yet when the situation is viewed through my perspective as *a historian and political scientist*, what seems obvious at first glance turns out to be far more complicated upon closer inspection.*

Subjective and changeable

The vital-interests approach has two fatal flaws: it's not at all obvious what a vital interest is and vital interests can change over time.

That is in large part because it's impossible to argue that vital interests are objectively real and that all countries always define their vital interests the same way.

In reality, a whole slew of subjective factors—leadership style, ideology, culture, regime type and history—determine which interests are vital as much as, if not more than, any objective quality the supposed interest possesses.

As the “[2022 Index of U.S. Military Strength](#)” produced by the conservative Heritage Foundation puts it, “Measuring or categorizing a threat is problematic because there is no absolute reference that can be used in assigning a quantitative score.”

Another report, this time on “[U.S. Strategic Interests in the Arctic](#),” nicely illustrates the muddied waters in which the vital-interests school finds itself:

“During the height of the Cold War, the Arctic region was considered a geostrategy and geopolitical playground for the United States and the Soviet Union, as strategic bombers and nuclear submarines crossed over and raced below the polar cap.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region diminished in strategic importance to the United States. Now, 20 years later, senior U.S. military and diplomatic officials have turned their attention once again to the Arctic but in a far different way than during the Cold War.”

How strange: at first the Arctic was strategic, then it became nonstrategic, before finally reacquiring strategic status. The Arctic obviously hadn't changed. What did change were the perceptions of both Western and Russian policy makers.

‘Too small, too weak, too poor’

According to [John Mearsheimer](#), the influential University of Chicago political scientist [most associated with the vital interests approach](#), “Ukraine is not a vital strategic interest for the West. It is a vital strategic interest for the Russians, they have made that perfectly clear, and not just Putin.”

But then Mearsheimer contradicts himself: “Putin is a 19th Century man. He does view the world in terms of balance of power politics...In the case of Europe, we were thinking like 21st Century people.”

In other words, Mearsheimer appears to be saying that Ukraine matters to Putin, not because it has mattered, matters and will always matter to Russia in some objective way. Rather, it matters because he is a 19th century man, harking back to a period of imperial ambitions and rule by Russia, [when it became the largest country in the world](#).

By implication, were Putin a modern man or a 15th century czar, Ukraine would matter less or not at all.

If you define a vital interest as something that immediately affects the physical survival of a country and its defining features as the country it is, then Ukraine is no

objectively vital interest of Russia. Ukraine is too small, too weak and too poor to threaten Russia's survival in any imaginable scenario. By analogy, think of Canada vis-a-vis the United States. Russia dissembled for months before the outbreak of the war, claiming that it feared Ukraine would become a militant outpost of an aggressive NATO.

In fact, NATO's armies are in miserable condition, NATO's rules don't require a military response in the event of a member nation being attacked, and Ukraine's chances of joining NATO in the next 20 years were next to nil.

Russia's stated goals in Ukraine have gone from stemming NATO expansion to protecting the Donbas region, but their true aim, as Russian policy makers have explicitly stated since the war began, is not to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, but to destroy it as a state and nation.

Imaginary threats

If we accept that Putin has a 19th-century imperialist mindset, however, Ukraine represents a threat to Russia in his head. Similarly, Jews were no objective threat to Germany. It was Hitler's warped mind that identified them as such.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was, thus, not the inevitable consequence of NATO's encroachment on Ukraine's objective "vitalness" to Russia. Americans, Europeans, Russians and Ukrainians knew full well that Ukraine posed no objective threat to Russia. Rather, the war was the culmination of Putin's imperialist aspirations, just as World War II was the culmination of Hitler's and not the product of some putative threat to Germany from Poland, France or the Jews.

Ukraine hasn't threatened or even affected the West's physical survival since the country's independence in 1991 and, thus, was not an objectively vital interest of the West. But Putin made it into just such an interest by launching a full-scale genocidal war against Ukraine in February.

Ukraine has now become transformed into a buffer between the democratic West and what I believe to be Putin's brand of imperialist fascism. the West's survival—both physical survival and as democratic nations—thus objectively depends, and is subjectively perceived as depending, on Ukraine's survival and ability to prevail.

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