Fencing the bear? Explaining US foreign policy towards Russian interventions

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To cite this article: Florian Böller & Sebastian Werle (2016) Fencing the bear? Explaining US foreign policy towards Russian interventions, Contemporary Security Policy, 37:3, 319-340, DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2016.1202653

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1202653

Published online: 14 Jul 2016.

Article views: 1420

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ABSTRACT

Despite the burgeoning literature on Russia’s renewed power politics, little attention has been paid to the fact that US reactions towards Russia’s military interventions were all but coherent. The USA has chosen weak measures in Georgia in 2008 (shaming) compared to its assertive response in Ukraine in 2014 (sanctions, hard deterrence). This article assesses the explanatory power of neorealist, liberal and constructivist theories for the variation in US reactions towards Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. Our argument is that the constructivist perspective explains the cases best as it highlights the power and communality of normative assessments. The Ukraine crisis was perceived by the USA as a violation of core international norms, especially the non-use of force and the principle of territorial integrity. Relevant international norm carriers shared this assessment of the conflict. In contrast, the perception of the Georgian war centred on the issue of democracy promotion. While democracy is an important aim of US foreign policy, it does not summon the same normative importance as general principles of international law. Furthermore, the perception of the Georgian war remained contested among Western allies, which decreased the communality of the normative assessment.

KEYWORDS US security policy; US-Russian relations; Ukraine crisis; military interventions; foreign policy theories; constructivism

Russia’s occupation of the Crimean peninsula in February 2014 and the following escalation and expansion of the conflict to the Eastern parts of Ukraine triggered a major crisis in the relations between Russia and the West.

Many observers have put Russia’s actions in Ukraine in perspective to its international position after the end of the Cold War. According to a prominent contribution by neorealist scholar John J. Mearsheimer, NATO’s expansion towards Russia’s borders provoked efforts to counterbalance US hegemony and to restore Moscow’s influence in the region. For realists, Russia’s actions in Ukraine reflect a grand strategy which began already in 2008, when Russian forces fought a short war against Georgia. The
connection between Russia’s interventions in Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014 are not only drawn by neorealists. Arguing from a different perspective, liberals claim that Russia and the West are still engaged in an ideological competition between democracy and authoritarianism: the West would attempt to attract other states such as Georgia and Ukraine to join the alliance of free market-oriented regimes.

Regardless of the theoretical perspective on Russia’s motives and whether East–West-relations are seen through the lens of an ideological competition or as a struggle for power, there is a remarkable lack of scholarly attention to the fact that the West’s response to Russia’s manoeuvres is all but coherent. Most notably, the West’s lead nation, the USA, has chosen very different measures to deal with Russian interventions. In the Georgia conflict of 2008, Washington, DC relied on weak instruments (i.e. shaming) to address Moscow’s military intervention. In the 2014 Ukraine conflict, on the other hand, the USA has opted for tougher measures (i.e. shaming, sanctions and hard deterrence). This variation in US behaviour is even more notable since one would have expected a harsher response from a Bush-led America than under the ‘reluctant warrior’ Barack Obama.

In this article we examine the causes for the variance in US behaviour. Our argument is that US foreign policy towards Russia can neither be fully explained by realism nor by liberal approaches, the two dominant International Relations (IR) paradigms. Rather, we hold that variation in US reactions to Russia’s power politics can be best understood through the lens of constructivism. The case comparison shows that the Ukraine crisis was perceived by the USA as a violation of core values. Russia’s occupation of the Crimean peninsula was constructed by the Obama administration as a clear breach of central international norms, especially the non-use of force and the principle of territorial integrity. Relevant international norm carriers, such as US allies in Europe, shared this particular assessment of the conflict. In contrast to the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the perception of the Georgian war of 2008 was mainly framed by the Bush administration along the issue of democracy promotion. While democracy is an important aim of US foreign policy, it does not summon the same normative importance as general principles of international law. Furthermore, the Bush administration’s perception of the Georgian war remained contested among European allies, which decreased the communality of the normative assessment.

In the next section, we discuss possible US foreign policy measures in reaction to perceived threats, outline methods of comparison and describe the cases. Subsequently, we derive hypotheses from IR theories to explain variation in US foreign policy. The next part examines US reactions towards Russia in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Finally, the conclusion discusses implications for IR studies and opportunities for further research.
The hegemon’s choice: reacting to threats to US interests

According to the 2015 US National Security Strategy, the world’s only superpower intends to act as ‘a global force for good, but it is grounded in (...) enduring national interests.’ These interests span widely from safeguarding its territory, citizens and allies to promoting the US economy and the protection of universal norms and a rule-based international order.

As this global claim of national interests is backed by vast hard and soft power tools, the US is able to respond to possible threats to national security by choosing from a wide range of measures. We can distinguish between (1) military intervention, (2) deterrence, (3) sanctions, (4) treaties, (5) shaming and (6) apathy.

Military intervention means the use of force to address a foreign policy threat. The category of deterrence describes a scenario in which Washington puts up military capabilities in a defensive posture aimed at deterring an opponent from further action. Sanctions imply provisions to harm an opponent economically. With treaties, the US can choose to build binding coalitions against an adversary or settle the dispute with an opponent. The category of shaming applies when high-ranking state officials speak out on a national security affair by naming and blaming the opponent’s behaviour. Finally, apathy refers to a foreign policy where a security threat is identified through relevant political actors but no concrete action is implemented.

Case selection and methodology

The purpose of this article is to trace the sources for varying US foreign policy responses in the two investigated events of Russian military interventions and weigh the outcome in a comparative perspective. Using a qualitative approach, the article sets out theoretical hypotheses, proposes indicators to observe the theoretical expectations and assesses possible causal paths between independent and dependent variables. As archival sources are not available for these rather recent cases, we rely on secondary sources and publicly available statements of the decision-makers. It will be considered that actors during the 2014 Ukraine crisis might have been influenced by the experience of the Georgia 2008 incident as they evaluated the situation.

While specific features of the cases differ, they do share considerable similarities that allow for a thorough comparison. Since the two cases are constituted by the same constellation of states, we can expect that factors which are connected to the specific attributes of the relationship between the two actors remain constant. Likewise, the configuration of the international system did not fundamentally change between the two cases. Other factors that render the cases comparable include their geostrategic position in Europe, the
It might be argued, that Russia’s behaviour during the Ukraine crisis was more severe and thus triggered a harsher response by the USA. In order to generate findings of relevance for international relations research, it is in any case important to analyse whether Russia’s action threatened US security more significantly (neorealist argument), whether it harmed interests of powerful social actors (liberal argument) or whether it was perceived as a violation of communal social norms (constructivist argument).

**Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014: a short case description**

We limit our assessment of the Georgia case to the period starting on 8 August 2008 (outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Georgia) up to 18 October 2008 (withdrawal of Russia from the buffer zones). For the case of Ukraine, the research period spans from 28 February 2014 (begin of Russia’s occupation of Crimea) to 17 April 2014 (first Geneva agreement endorsed), although the conflict has continued since then. This time frame suffices for our main purpose of understanding the variation in US foreign policy.

In Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, Moscow used armed forces to intervene militarily in sovereign countries. On 8 August 2008, Russian forces countered Georgian attacks against rebel forces (and allegedly Russia’s peacekeepers) in South Ossetia, pushed back Georgia’s army, bombed a military base near the capital, Tbilisi, and invaded Georgian mainland territory. Both sides accused each other of provoking the conflict, which was fuelled by long-time tensions between Georgia and separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as Russia. After a French brokered armistice, Russian forces withdrew from Georgia proper in September 2008. As a result of the conflict, Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but de facto controls the breakaway provinces and stationed permanent troop contingents on both territories.

The occupation of Crimea, which started in February 2014, on the other hand, did not result in an exchange of hostilities. However, unmarked Russian troops were deployed to secure the peninsula and to evict Ukrainian forces from their bases. After a referendum on 16 March 2014, Russia formally annexed the territory.

The policy reaction by the USA towards these two instances of Russian interventions (the dependent variable under investigation) differs considerably. In the case of Georgia, neither military, deterrence nor treaty measures were put in place. Rather, the Bush administration blamed Russia for its behaviour without implementing substantive policies to underscore this ‘shaming’ rhetoric.
In contrast to Georgia, the Obama administration not only blamed Russia rhetorically (shaming), but also imposed binding sanctions in concert with the European Union. The first round of sanctions was issued by President Obama with Executive Order 13660 on 6 March 2014. It is important to note that the decision to implement sanctions against Russia was taken before the referendum and subsequent formal annexation of Crimea as well as before the escalation of the crisis in Eastern Ukraine beginning in April 2014. Already with this first round of sanctions on 6 March 2014, the USA exceeded the level of response towards Russia compared to 2008.

In addition to sanctions, the USA led efforts to step up the Western alliance’s defensive posture in Eastern European member states by implementing the ‘European Reassurance Initiative’. This set of measures included intensified military cooperation with Eastern NATO members. Taken together, the US response towards Russia’s policies in Ukraine can be classified as shaming, deterrence and sanctions.

**Competing theoretical explanations for foreign policy variation**

IR theories help to identify specific rationales, incentives and costs that decision-makers consider when selecting a specific course in foreign policy. From the wide range of available theoretical approaches, we chose the three major foreign policy perspectives: neorealism, liberalism and constructivism. In order to keep the analysis parsimonious, we do not include hybrid approaches such as neo-classical realism or foreign policy psychology.

**Neorealism: power and security**

From a neorealist perspective, states act as ‘like units’ interested in securing their survival in an anarchical environment. As a consequence of the international system’s configuration, the distribution of power allocates resources to the states to achieve their aims. Power is usually defined as material capabilities (such as military and economic assets) and direct or indirect influence over territory.

Within the paradigm, offensive realism posits that states aim to maximize power in order to enhance their security. For defensive realists, states rather seek to secure their relative position vis-à-vis other international players. While this distinction makes a difference for the outcome of international politics, it proves less important when using structural realism’s propositions for a foreign policy theory. Although Kenneth Waltz himself was skeptical to use neorealism to predict foreign policy, it can be inferred that states receive structural incentives to react to changes to both their security and power position. These threats materialize directly from actions of other states and will be evaluated rationally by the decision-makers. In that respect, societal
discourses, enemy-images or historical narratives do not influence how the threat is perceived.

Within the current international system, the USA possesses vast economic and military resources as well as political leverage. Its foreign policy strategy will aim at defending this unipolar position, deter or counter major balancing efforts by other states, and combat threats to vital security interests.\(^{18}\)

Following these basic features of neorealist thinking, we can identify two mechanisms which promote assertive foreign policy measures. First, as survival is the most central objective for states within a hostile international environment, threats against vital security interests require action. States are not expected to react to threats to their prestige or value-based interest, but only to security related concerns. Hence, we can also assume more assertive measures to the degree that vital security interests are at stake (R1). For the USA vital security interests include the protection of its homeland and major allies from military threats.\(^{19}\)

Second, states seek to maintain their power position within the international system. The USA should therefore react to attempts of adversaries to shift the unipolar power constellation. A shifting power position of a challenging state, induced by a certain foreign policy behaviour (e.g. through the annexation of a strategically important territory) raises the incentives for the hegemon to counter with harsh responses (e.g. sanctions, and more likely deterrence or military intervention). The second neorealist hypothesis therefore supposes that variation in a state’s response to opponents occurs if the respective actions by other states challenge the hegemon’s position more severely (R2).

**Liberal theory: preferences and institutions**

In contrast to the systemic theory of neorealism, liberals treat domestic interests and institutions as analytically prior to external incentives. Decision-makers in democratic societies are elected and accountable to their constituency on domestic as well as foreign policy issues.\(^{20}\) In order to keep each foreign policy theory distinct, we focus on the utilitarian tradition within liberalism to generate hypotheses. Here, liberal theory holds that on average, individuals act rationally and risk-averse and choose a foreign policy which is expected to realize their interests.\(^{21}\)

Liberal theory acknowledges that the international sphere is inherently interdependent. States share interests with other international powers in some areas while they have divergent priorities in others. Decision-makers of democratic polities will evaluate the policy externalities of international actions with regard to powerful societal groups. They will determine the costs and risks associated with a policy and try to protect relevant domestic groups (which are important to secure their re-election). Accordingly, the
first hypothesis of liberal theory (L1) expects policy variations if the cost-benefit ratio changes and relevant domestic groups would have to bear the externalities of a decision and/or if cooperation in interdependent fields of relative importance would be threatened.

The specific institutional setting of democratic regimes influences which preferences are successfully represented and pursued in international politics. In this ‘two-level game’, actors compete for control of representative institutions which possess certain powers to determine the policy formulation. To implement an international measure, actors must win elections, represent the interests of their winning coalition and they must be able to overcome institutional hurdles that might impede their agenda. New presidents or changing majorities can influence the course of US foreign policy as they introduce distinct agendas or enable domestic groups to block policy initiatives, for example, in times of divided government. Therefore the second liberal hypothesis (L2) holds that policy change is the result of shifts in the policy network. For the US case, the relevant policy network consists of the President and Congress as the two main institutional players.

**Constructivism: norms and values**

Constructivist foreign policy approaches concur with the liberal thesis that societal processes shape the external behaviour of states. Yet while most liberals use a rational-choice perspective to model domestic politics, constructivists stress the importance of norms, values and ideas. Following Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, actors in international relations are influenced by powerful norms on domestic as well as international levels. The power of these norms is relative to their communality within societies. In the case of an international crisis, policy-makers will evaluate the situation with an eye on applicable norms and values. If the actor conceives a crisis as a violation of relevant societal norms, he will be pressured to react to the transgression. Since international norms are seldom unambiguous or undisputed, the state’s reaction will be influenced by the perception of other relevant norm carriers on the international level and by the degree of societal importance that the norm entails for the actor.

While US presidents are powerful norm entrepreneurs within the USA due to their privileged position in the public discourse, they are also bound by the communality and power of their normative assessment of a crisis. If a presidential discourse fails to resonate within the domestic or international environment, policy options might lack a sufficient amount of legitimacy.

Two mechanisms follow from these assumptions: First, if the violated norm is more important, it can also be expected that the state’s reaction will be more assertive compared to a situation when only minor norms are
transgressed (C1). Presidents will be exposed to domestic and international pressure to respond to the violation of central norms.

Second, if the perception of a crisis as a norm violation is shared by a higher number of norm carriers and a higher degree of consensus within the group of norm carriers exists, varying foreign policy responses should be expected (C2). Allied countries (such as NATO member states) and international organization such as the United Nations or the European Union are norm carriers that we expect to affect US foreign policy. The norms that we consider in our analysis can be derived from the UN Charter, amongst others the respect for the sovereignty of states and the recognition of human rights. Their societal importance must be evaluated regarding the domestic acceptance of a norm and its international legitimacy.

Explaining US foreign policy in the Georgia and Ukraine cases

Neorealism: responding to power shifts?

From a neorealist perspective, the growing assertiveness in Putin’s foreign policy is a result of US dominance interfering with Russia’s ‘near abroad’, where Moscow sees vital interest threatened. As Elias Götz put it, Russia’s balancing efforts followed geopolitical imperatives, which are ‘to prevent neighbouring countries from teaming up with outside powers’. Thus, when the US pushed for NATO’s expansion at the 2008 Bucharest summit by offering Georgia and Ukraine ‘road maps’ to alliance membership, Russia reacted in accordance with neorealist textbook claims.

The USA in turn reacted differently in both cases (i.e. shaming in 2008 in contrast to shaming, sanctions and deterrence in 2014). According to neorealist hypotheses, this variance in behaviour is explainable, if Russia’s actions threatened core US interests in the case of Ukraine rather than Georgia (R1) or if the relative gains in power for Russia were more substantial in 2014 than in 2008 (R2).

According to the 2015 National Security Strategy, the USA does not consider Russia as a threat to its security. Russia’s action are only described as a ‘challenge’ in contrast to threats such as international terrorism. Indeed, the neorealist advice against assertive measures during the Ukraine crisis is grounded on the argument that the US has no vital interests in counterbalancing Russia. From a systemic perspective, the difference in the intensity of interests that Georgia and Ukraine possess for Russia and the USA results from geopolitical proximity.

In a 2016 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, Barack Obama acknowledged this difference in the intensity of interest: ‘The fact is that Ukraine, which is a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do.’ Goldberg concludes ‘Obama’s theory here is
simple: Ukraine is a core Russian interest but not an American one, so Russia will always be able to maintain escalatory dominance there. It could be argued, that Russia’s assertiveness affects core US interests as NATO allies in Poland and the Baltic states feel threatened by Moscow. However, this threat assessment is apparently not shared by the USA and according to the official NATO position, Russia is not considered a direct threat to the security of the alliance.

As both interventions did not directly concern vital US interests, the first neorealist hypothesis (R1) adequately accounts for the weak US response in the case of Georgia 2008, but runs into difficulties explaining the harsher response against Russia in 2014.

Regarding a significant increase in power as a trigger for US countermeasures (R2), it is questionable, whether Russia could actually enlarge its sphere of influence. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been under Russia’s protection since 1994 and 1992. Neither did the annexation of Crimea induce a significant increase in power for Moscow. In fact, already before the annexation, Sevastopol served as the main naval base for Russia’s Black Sea fleet. One might also argue that the annexation of Crimea improved Russia’s status as a capable military power and thus resulted in a significant increase of prestige for Russia. Yet, factors such as prestige and status would transcend a traditional neorealist analysis. From a strategic perspective, Russia’s actions destabilized a neighbouring country. Whether Russia’s power position benefits from a ‘frozen conflict’ next door is at least debatable.

According to the neorealist perspective, Russia’s assertiveness could also be seen as an attempt to pre-empt an augmentation of US power. Yet, Moscow’s interventions did not directly prevent Georgia or Ukraine from becoming a NATO member. The decision to refuse Tbilisi and Kiev a Membership Action Plan (MAP) had already been taken at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, that is before Russia’s intervention in Georgia.

Looking at the systemic balance of power, a significant challenge to the unipolar position of the US cannot be detected in both cases. Mauritzen and Wivel concede from a structural realist perspective for the Georgian-Russo War in 2008: ‘In sum, looking solely at these traditional measures of material power, there was no reason why the United States should view Russia as a potential challenger to its unipolar power position in 2008.

Short term gains in territory and military presence in Russia’s ‘near abroad’ should also be discounted with the longer term consequences of the two interventions. These include expenses for military action and the support of Crimea’s economy as well as for the Georgian breakaway provinces.

In addition, it is important to note that the annexation of Crimea (and the following war in the East) alienated Ukrainian society and elite from Russia and made future rapprochement unlikely. To drive a wedge between Ukraine and the West was, however, a central ‘geopolitical consideration’
for Russia according to neorealist analysis. In effect, Ukraine now more than ever seeks to align itself within the Western camp and cooperate with NATO. Similarly, Georgia stayed on its path as a liberal democracy with close ties to Washington even after Sakashvili’s tenure.

These arguments lead to the conclusion that Russia’s interventions did neither pose a direct threat to vital US interests (R1) nor did Moscow’s power position significantly change (R2). Thus, if we apply neorealist logic, while the weak response by the USA in the Georgian case is consistent with the theoretical expectations, there would have been no need to react with comparatively harsh policy measures in the case of Ukraine.

**Liberal theory: influenced by costs and risks?**

According to the first liberal hypothesis (L1), varying US responses should occur if the cost-benefit ratio of a foreign policy changed and/or if cooperation in interdependent fields of relative importance would be threatened.

Considering the financial costs of imposing sanctions against Russia, neither in 2008 nor in 2014 the magnitude of US-Russian economic relations was significant enough to produce policy externalities for important domestic groups. In 2008 as well as in 2014, only 0.5 per cent of all US exports went to Russia. It is therefore unlikely that the fear of economic consequences prevented the Bush administration from imposing more assertive policy measures.

In terms of the negative effects on other policy areas from worsened US-Russian relations, one might argue that Washington, DC highly valued its cooperation with Moscow, for example, in the field of anti-terror policies. While it is plausible that considerations by the Bush administration regarding the negative effects on other areas of cooperation might have dampened countermeasures towards Russia during the 2008 Georgia conflict, the same logic would apply to the situation of 2014. Here, Russia still possessed enough leverage to obstruct those policies which rank among the top US international priorities (especially concerning Syria and Iran). Therefore, it is not observable that either the cost-benefit calculus for the US changed from 2008 to 2014 or that the more assertive measures of 2014 entailed less costs or implied less negative consequences than in 2008.

According to the second liberal hypothesis (L2), it could be the case that a more assertive response in 2014 resulted from a shift in the US foreign policy network.

The 2008 elections indeed led to a change from a Republican to a Democratic presidency. However, the foreign policy network’s reconfiguration cannot fully account for the variance in US response towards Russia. On the one hand, Obama’s tougher response in the Ukraine case fits to the pattern of his liberal internationalist doctrine. Already during the election
campaign, Obama promised to change course in US foreign policy and emphasized the importance of multilateralism and a norm-based international order.\textsuperscript{43} On the other hand, it remains puzzling, why Bush relied on weaker measures compared to Obama given the Bush administration’s track-record of unilateral and assertive foreign policy measures. After all, the promotion of democratic regimes in general and the integration of Georgia into the West more specifically figured prominently on Bush’s neo-conservative international agenda.\textsuperscript{44}

It is also not plausible that domestic veto players foreclosed policy alternatives in response to Russia’s interventions. In both cases, Congress did not possess the power to directly hinder the President to impose sanctions via executive orders.

President Bush’s policy still might have been influenced by the fact that he faced or expected opposition from Congress or the public. However, George W. Bush was already a ‘lame duck’ in 2008 and thus not immediately vulnerable to political critique. Furthermore, there was no indication from relevant political players that they would oppose the President’s course during the crisis or propose alternative policies.\textsuperscript{45} The only important group inside the Bush administration suggesting stronger measures was the national security team of Vice President Richard Cheney, who toyed with the option of bombing the Roki Tunnel to prevent Russian forces from advancing into core Georgia.\textsuperscript{46} But this group did not promote the hard power option publicly, which leads to the conclusion that no relevant political actor pushed for any other option but shaming.

Taken together, both liberal hypotheses (L1 and L2) cannot account for the variation in US behaviour towards Russia.

\textit{Constructivism: critical norm violation?}

In his initial reaction to the outbreak of hostilities in Georgia on 9 August 2008, President Bush depicted the situation as a threat to regional peace and security. While he called for a halt of the violent conflict and specifically addressed Russia’s bombardments, he also emphasized that Georgia’s territorial integrity must not be violated.\textsuperscript{47} Two days later, Bush assigned the blame for the outbreak of the conflict to Russia—although Georgian troops were first to open fire in the conflict: ‘Russia has invaded a sovereign neighboring state and threatens a democratic government elected by its people. Such an action is unacceptable in the 21st century.’\textsuperscript{48} The President thus highlighted Georgia’s democratic regime type to stress the gravity of Russia’s actions while only implicitly referring to the norm of non-use of force in international relations.

This manner of constructing a narrative of the situation as a conflict between the democracy of Georgia and Russia’s autocratic and aggressive regime was also apparent in Bush’s remarks on 15 August 2008. Here, the
President unmistakably endorsed Georgia as a US ally and connected this commitment to the democratic features of Georgia: ‘The United States and our allies stand with the people of Georgia and their democratically elected government.’ Bush also sought to explain why this conflict would matter to the USA. He elaborated on Georgia’s path to become a free and independent member of the community of Western nations and concluded, that ‘(t)he people of Georgia have cast their lot with the free world, and we will not cast them aside.’

On the other hand, Bush accused Russia of perceiving the democratic transformation of Georgia as a threat to its interests. He contended that by its actions ‘Russia has damaged its credibility and its relations with the nations of the free world. Bullying and intimidation are not acceptable ways to conduct foreign policy in the 21st century.’ Overall, Bush’s rhetoric aimed at highlighting the norm of democracy as an important value for foreign policy.

After first reports of unmarked Russian troops invading Ukrainian territory on the Crimean peninsula surfaced on 28 February 2014, President Obama warned Putin that ‘there will be costs for any military intervention in Ukraine.’ In a telephone conversation with the Russian president on the following day, Obama condemned Russia’s behaviour as a ‘clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.’ The US president also explicitly referred to several norms, which he accused Russia of having breached. ‘Russia’s military intervention into Ukrainian territory’, the president denounced, represented a violation of the Charter of the United Nation.

In his remarks to justify the imposition of sanctions against Russia on 6 March 2014, Obama continued in the same vein and criticized the violation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. He argued in his statement, that the sanctions were intended ‘to oppose actions that violate international law and to support the government and people of Ukraine.’ It is worth mentioning that Obama depicted the crisis as a clear assessment in terms of international law and underscored that the US would act multilaterally. Russia, on the other hand, was portrayed as an outsider to the international community’s common policy: ‘Today the world can see that the United States is united with our allies and partners in upholding international law and pursuing a just outcome that advances global security and the future that the Ukrainian people deserve.

Analysing the two cases through the lens of constructivism points to several important insights. First, while President Bush primarily sought to construct the crisis as a threat to the value of democracy, Obama used the events to stress general principles of international law. Comparing the power of both normative assessments, it is clear that the attempt to frame Russia’s action in the Ukraine as a violation of the principle of territorial integrity (and thus Article 2.4 of the UN Charter) trumps the norm of
democratic government. While the expansion of democracy played a central role in the neoconservative foreign policy agenda of the Bush administration, it cannot draw on a similar level of legitimacy in international law compared to the prohibition of the use of force.

From the perspective of international law, Article 2.4 is arguably the most central norm of the UN Charter and even considered to be customary law.57 In contrast, the norm to export or defend democracy abroad remains disputed.58 Domestically, promoting democracy abroad does not rank among the core foreign policy goals of the US according to public opinion polls.59 As Obama explicitly justified the imposition of sanctions with regards to the norm violations of Russia, the hypothesis gains causal support. Although the issue of non-use of force was at stake in Georgia, too, the Bush administration’s narrative focused on the issue of democracy promotion. It is plausible that Georgia’s own responsibility for the initiation of the conflict foreclosed arguments centred on international law rather than democracy for the Bush administration.60 In addition, as a signatory state of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum the USA was directly committed to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, which increased the domestic weight of the norm.61 Therefore, the first constructivist hypothesis (C1) must be regarded as valid: the more assertive response fits the observed pattern of more powerful norms which have been violated.

The second hypothesis (C2) also supports the constructivist perspective. In the case of Russia’s behaviour during the Ukrainian crisis, the USA could count on international support both from its major allies in Europe and international organizations.62 In a statement by the NATO Council on 2 March 2014, the transatlantic alliance condemned Moscow’s actions and demanded to ‘respect its obligations under the United Nations Charter and the spirit and principles of the OSCE, on which peace and stability in Europe rest’.63 Similar declarations on the crisis were issued already within the initial period of the conflict by the European Union and the G7.64 While in the UN Security Council (UNSC) Russia vetoed any resolution which would go against its interests, the UN General Assembly later approved resolution 68/262 declaring the secession of Crimea illegitimate.

In contrast to the largely unanimous discourse by Western democracies blaming Russia for the violation of international norms, a similar consensus was not obtainable in the case of the Georgian crisis in 2008. Poland and the Baltic states issued a joint declaration to ‘strongly condemn the actions by the Russian military forces against the sovereign and independent country of Georgia’ and demanded consequences.65 While these judgments resemble the rhetoric of President Bush, other NATO member states as well as NATO’s common position were more careful in framing the crisis.66 Some European allies of the US, most notably Germany and Italy, issued remarks hinting at a balanced assessment of the crisis. German
Chancellor Merkel, for example, was quoted that ‘(b)oth sides are probably to blame’. It is feasible that the perception of Russia’s behaviour in Ukraine was influenced by the experience of the Georgian war. At least Eastern European countries, and thus relevant international norm carriers for the US, felt vindicated in their previous judgment of Russia. From a constructivist perspective, it can be argued that policy-makers learned from the Georgia crisis. This would support the constructivist hypotheses as the power and communality of norms is *inter alia* based on historical experiences and constituted by processes of social learning.

Table 1. Summary of findings.

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Rationalists might argue that value interests were merely ‘cheap talk’ to mask the true motives of actors. Yet, according to the constructivist logic of appropriateness, decision-makers are bound by social norms which constitute their interests. From a rationalist perspective, one should even expect that actors refer to security threats wherever possible. The fact that the Obama administration did not use security centred narratives to legitimize its policy in the 2014 Ukraine crisis adds plausibility to the constructivist argument. To the contrary, the Obama administration was careful to avoid a framing of the conflict in terms of national security.

Put together, the constructivist hypotheses (C1 and C2) can adequately account for the policy variation as they highlight both the severity of the norm violation and the consensus among norm carriers which seemed to have influenced US foreign policy (see Table 1).

**Conclusion**

The growing tension between Russia and the USA after the outset of the Ukraine crisis have sparked new interest in Moscow’s foreign policy. Despite the burgeoning literature on Russia’s recent assertiveness in world affairs, little attention has been paid to the question how to explain the variance in US response towards Russia’s military interventions. After all, the USA has chosen very different policies: when Russia intervened in Georgia in 2008, President Bush responded with diplomatic means, while in 2014, President Obama has opted for tougher measures (sanctions and hard deterrence). The aim of our article was to find the sources of the varying US foreign policy response towards Russian interventions.

In assessing the explanatory power of the three main IR theories, we hold that the constructivist perspective provides the best answer to the puzzle. We found support for the thesis that the more assertive US foreign policy response towards Russia’s intervention in Ukraine 2014 was influenced by the power and communality of norms which Moscow’s foreign policy violated. In the case of Georgia 2008, policy-makers pointed primarily to the violation of democratic values. Yet democracy promotion does not summon the necessary domestic support compared to the violation of accepted international norms. In addition, important norm carriers outside the USA shared the assessment that relevant norms had been violated in the case of the Ukrainian intervention. In contrast to the Georgian-Russo war of 2008, the transatlantic alliance unanimously considered Russia’s behaviour as a violation of international law. This in turn created pressure for the world’s hegemon to react and punish the norm transgression.

This conclusion contradicts neorealist theories on their ‘home turf’: great power relations. Rather than acting erratic and following an incoherent ‘double standard’ regarding the promotion of a value-based world order,
US decision-makers take domestic and international norms into account when choosing foreign policy measures. This is regardless of the fact that the USA still possesses considerably more material resources to react unilaterally to threats to its interests compared to any other major power.

Regarding the current debate on US grand strategy, both liberals and realists criticize Obama’s pragmatism and his reluctant approach to international challenges. Liberals bemoan that the administration’s Russia policy lacks an emphasis on human rights and democracy promotion, realists despise the absence of powerful leadership. As this article has shown, Obama’s strategy on Russia can be understood as a ‘middle of the road’ approach. While reluctant to exert hard power leadership, the President relies on multilateral cooperation with European allies and reacts with assertive measures (sanctions and deterrence) to challenges against a rule-based liberal order.

These insights seem to confirm a pattern of foreign policy under the Obama administration not only vis-à-vis Russia. In the case of the 2011 Libya intervention, Obama only reluctantly supported Operation Odyssey Dawn, which was primarily initiated by France and the UK. In his justification for the use of force, the President highlighted that the USA acted in concert with its European allies and that other Arab states also supported the intervention. In addition, Obama emphasized the international legitimacy of the mission and the approval of the UNSC. In other recent cases, such as the air campaign against the Islamic State or the non-proliferation policy towards Iran, the US also favours multilateralism, which generates considerable domestic and international legitimacy. It remains to be seen whether Obama’s approach will suffice to contain Russia’s new aspirations in international relations. Yet, this multilateral and norm-based strategy currently seems to be the only policy option which summons enough societal acceptance and support.

Notes


16. Ibid., p.9.


29. Götz, ‘Putin, the State, and War’ (note 2).

Foreign Policy: The Crimea Case, CLAWS Journal (Summer 2014), pp.116–128; Götz, ‘Putin, the State, and War’ (note 2); Bock et al., ‘If You Compress’ (note 28).


34. See then-NATO Secretary General Rasmussen’s assessment in September 2014: ‘I don’t think Russia poses an imminent threat to NATO Allies for the very reason that Russia knows that we have an Article 5 in our NATO Treaty that protects any Ally against attack.’ NATO, ‘A Force for Freedom: Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at Carnegie Europe’, 15 September 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_113063.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 6 June 2016).


38. See Mauritzen and Wivel, ‘Explaining Foreign Policy’ (note 30), pp.105–7. Nota bene the authors introduce additional arguments why the US was actually underbalancing in the Georgian case. However, incentives such as preserving the ‘political project of the unipole’ stretch the analytical scope of neorealism.


40. See Dmitri Trenin, The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry (Moscow: Carnegie Center, 2014).

41. See Michael B. Bishku, ‘The South Caucasus Republics: Relations with the U.S. and the EU’, Middle East Policy, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2015), p.46. See Asmus’ more or less realist assessment of the outcome of the Georgia crisis. Ronald Asmus, A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the
West (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.221. The argument also applies to NATO’s internal cohesion which was strengthened as a consequence of the Ukraine crisis. A partial exception in this context is Armenia’s continued alignment with Russia.


46. Cheney was accused by Russia for pushing Georgia to start the war in order to increase McCain’s chances during the 2008 presidential campaign. In fact, the Bush administration frequently warned Saakashvili not to get trapped into hostilities with Russia. See Asmus, ‘A Little War’ (note 41), p.151.


50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. While labeling Russia as the aggressor in the crisis and underscoring the importance of Georgia’s territorial integrity in his response to the conflict, Bush did not explicitly refer to other potential norm violations (such as the non-use of force or the non-intervention in internal affairs). When on 26 August 2008, Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, the US president repeated his demand to respect Georgia’s sovereignty and accused Russia of violating the six-point cease-fire agreement of 16 August 2008 and previous UN Security Council Resolutions. See White House, ‘President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia’, 16 August 2008, http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080816-1.html (accessed 6 June 2016).


56. Ibid.
62. See for a more detailed account on EU reactions Nováky, ‘Why so Soft’ (note 5).

See Andrei P. Tsygankov, Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); see also note 30.


**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Sarah Wagner, Helge Staff, Jürgen Wilzewski, Lukas Herr, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and advice.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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