

# Palestine and Ukraine: A Postcolonial Critique of the Neo-Realist Strategy of Offshore Balancing

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## Abstract

This article employs Edward Said's contrapuntal reading to challenge the account offered by proponents of offshore balancing of the conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine. This reading, the article argues, presents two challenges to the strategy of offshore balancing. First, it shows that the strategy's treatment of Israel and Russia as states like any others morally equalises the dispossessors and the dispossessed, and leads to unviable policy conclusions – namely, the two-state solution (Palestine) and territorial concessions (Ukraine). Second, it shows that the strategy's assessment of these conflicts solely based on capabilities harms US national security and threatens the survival of the United States as a liberal democracy. The article advances postcolonial critiques of neo-realism towards its contemporary application via offshore balancing in Palestine and Ukraine. Furthermore, by extending Said's contrapuntal reading to Ukraine, it contributes to a closer engagement between postcolonial scholarship on the 'Global East' and the 'Global South'.

## Keywords

Edward Said, IR theory, offshore balancing

## Introduction

Acts of barbarism in the colonies, Aimé Césaire says in *Discourse on Colonialism*, do not stay in the colonies: violence, as Nazism has shown, boomerangs into the metropole.<sup>1</sup> What applies to action applies to theory and strategy. A great deal of commentary on

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1. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 41.

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neo-realist theory and strategy in Ukraine, presented in the media,<sup>2</sup> and a number of publications,<sup>3</sup> critiques John Mearsheimer's rationalisation of Russian imperialism. The relationship between neo-realism and imperialism, however, does not originate in Europe; it boomerangs from other parts of the non-European world, as postcolonial scholarship widely shows.<sup>4</sup> Despite outlining the imperial origins of neo-realist concepts, such as anarchy, the balance of power and sovereignty, postcolonial commentary does not engage with contemporary strategies employed by neo-realists. The focus of postcolonial scholars is on an alternative strategy, liberal hegemony, and its association with 'neo-imperial humanitarian interventionism',<sup>5</sup> empty universalism and the Eurocentric 'liberal peace'.<sup>6</sup> While 'liberal hegemony' as a strategy received its fair share of postcolonial critiques, the neo-realist alternative strategy of offshore balancing, perhaps due to its advocacy of a more restrained approach in US foreign policy, is left unnoticed by postcolonial scholars. This article offers a postcolonial critique of the neo-realist strategy of offshore balancing.

The offshore balancing strategy was popularised in recent years by, among others, Barry Posen, Christopher Layne, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer.<sup>7</sup> It is a strategy for

2. Isaac Chotiner, 'Why John Mearsheimer Blames the U.S. for the Crisis in Ukraine', *The New Yorker*, 1 March 2022; Adam Tooze, 'John Mearsheimer and the Dark Origins of Realism', *The New Statesman*, 8 March 2022.
3. Mathew Spectre, 'Realism's Imperial Origins', *Dissent* 69, no. 3 (2022): 70–2; Ned Lebow, 'International Relations Theory and the Ukrainian War', *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 1 (2022): 111–35; Felix Roesch, 'Realism, the War in the Ukraine, and the Limits of Diplomacy', *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 2 (2022): 201–18.
4. Enrol Henderson, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism in International Relations Theory', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2013): 71–92; John Hobson, 'The Twin Self-Delusions of IR: Why "Hierarchy" and Not "Anarchy" Is the Core Concept of IR', *Millennium* 42, no. 3 (2014): 557–75; Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Sanjay Seth, 'Postcolonial Theory and the Critique of International Relations', *Millennium* 40, no. 1 (2011): 167–83; Meera Sabaratnam, 'Is IR Theory White? Racialised Subject-Positioning in Three Canonical Texts', *Millennium* 49, no. 1 (2020): 3–31; Navid Pourmokhtari, 'A Postcolonial Critique of State Sovereignty in IR: The Contradictory Legacy of a "West-Centric" Discipline', *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 10 (2013): 1767–93; Himadeep Muppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations* (London: Hurst & Co, 2012).
5. Robbie Shilliam, 'Intervention and Colonial-Modernity: Decolonising the Italy/Ethiopia Conflict Through Psalms', *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 5 (2013): 1131–47; Beate Jahn, 'Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects', *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 43–61.
6. Meera Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism in the Critique of the Liberal Peace', *Millennium* 44, no. 3 (2013): 259–78; Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'The Imperial Peace: Democracy, Force and Globalization', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 4 (1999): 403–34; Rita Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourses and Good Governance in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2000).
7. Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2008); Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Christopher Layne, 'From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy', *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 86–124; Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, 'A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States', *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 4 (2011): 803–19; John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4: 70–83.

the United States as an insular power with weak neighbours in its backyard and the safety of two expansive oceans.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of the strategy ‘capitalise on the inherent strategic advantages’ that such insularity offers to keep the United States ‘powerful and secure without pursuing a costly and expansive grand strategy’.<sup>9</sup> The strategy stipulates that the most cost-effective way to ensure America’s security is to retain its hegemonic position in the Western hemisphere and prohibit other great powers from attaining America’s feat in their regions. Where potential hegemonies are likely to rise, such as China in East Asia, the strategy stipulates that America should establish balancing coalitions against them.<sup>10</sup> Where no state has the capability to become a regional hegemon, such as in the Middle East or Europe, proponents of the strategy argue that the US military should remain offshore. US military engagement in the Middle East and the ‘special relationship’ with Israel, these scholars argue, harm US interests.<sup>11</sup> In Europe, the decision to expand NATO antagonised Russia and led to the crisis in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> In both cases, the strategy operates on a neo-realist ontology of ‘billiard balls’, namely the assumption that Israel and Russia are states like any others, driven by survival under anarchy. In the case of Israel, this translates to the strategy’s commitment to Israel’s survival alongside a Palestinian state and an even-handed stance on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the case of Russia, this translates to the strategy’s call to respect its security concerns and offer concessions.

This article employs Edward Said’s contrapuntal reading to challenge the account offered by proponents of offshore balancing of the conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine. To employ Said’s contrapuntal reading as a method means to account for the ‘intertwined and interconnected histories’ of imperialism and resistance, the dispossessors and the dispossessed, in the transnational relations of empire.<sup>13</sup> The state in this account, whether Israel or Russia, is not a black-box, but embedded in relations of empire and resistance

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8. Stephen Walt, ‘US Grand Strategy After the Cold War: Can Realism Explain It? Should Realism Guide It?’, *International Relations* 32, no. 1 (2018): 13; Mearsheimer and Walt, ‘Case for Offshore Balancing’, 73.
  9. Christopher Layne, ‘America’s Middle East Grand Strategy After Iraq: The Moment for Offshore Balancing Has Arrived’, *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 10; Mearsheimer and Walt, ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing’, 72.
  10. There are variations on this. As Dylan Motin writes, ‘containers [such as Walt and Mearsheimer] argue for the United States to act preventively by establishing balancing coalitions against potential regional hegemonies, while restrainers [such as Layne] have a hands-off policy of letting nature take its course in Asia and Europe’. Dylan Motin, ‘Not in My Backyard, But in Yours: Containment Realism, Restraint Realism and China-US Competition’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2022): 29. As this article’s focus is not on China, these variations are beyond the scope of this article.
  11. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israeli Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 204; Layne, ‘America’s Middle East Grand Strategy After Iraq’, 23; Posen, *Restraint*, 119.
  12. Mearsheimer and Walt, ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing’, 82; John Mearsheimer, ‘Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin’, *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77–89; Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, ‘Why Are We in Ukraine’, *Harper’s Magazine*, June 2023, pp. 23–35.
  13. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, NY: Random House, 1993), 66–7; Tarak Barkawi, ‘Decolonising War’, *European Journal of International Security* 1, no. 2 (2016): 212; Tawak Barkawi, ‘Empire and Order in International Relations and Security Studies’, in *The International Studies Encyclopaedia, Volume III*, ed. Robert Denemark (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1374.

that operate in a transnational space. Said's contrapuntal reading showcases how the discourse of empire operated historically – and still operates – within this space, to essentialise cultures, advance stereotypes, dehumanise populations and enable policies that shape the conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine. A contrapuntal reading challenges this discourse and counters its depoliticisation of the relations of empire and resistance by re-embedding them in the political and economic realities. By narrating these relational histories and realities, Said's contrapuntal reading opens possibilities to engage with the histories of the dispossessed. These histories entail longer time frames of imperial violence than reified accounts whose reference point is the state. In Palestine and Ukraine, they reveal stories of imperial violence that did not begin in 2014, 2022 or 2023, but are enduring in the social, political, economic and cultural relations that constitute imperialism and anti-imperial resistance across a longer timescale. This reading, the article argues, presents two challenges to the strategy of offshore balancing. First, it shows that the strategy's treatment of Israel and Russia as states like any others morally equalises the dispossessors and the dispossessed, and leads to unviable policy conclusions – namely, the two-state solution (Palestine) and concessions (Ukraine). Second, it shows that the strategy's assessment of these conflicts is solely based on capabilities – that is, their impact on the balance of power – harms US national security and threatens the survival of the United States as a liberal democracy.

The article presents two contributions to advance scholarly debates on postcolonial International relations (IR). First, it advances postcolonial critiques of neo-realist concepts and assumptions by pushing these critiques beyond the theory and towards their application via the strategy of offshore balancing in Palestine and Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> The contribution here showcases the nexus between theory and strategy. Offshore balancing is a strategy whose stance seems, at first glance, to be neutral towards all states – which are, after all, treated 'alike' and 'normal'. This article shows that such a seemingly neutral stance, in fact, is not only politically and morally problematic in practice, but also fails to serve what justifies offshore balancing as a strategy: US national security. Second, since the 2007 *Millennium* forum on Said,<sup>15</sup> his contrapuntal reading received greater attention in IR.<sup>16</sup> The article builds on this scholarship by extending the empirical

14. For these critiques see, among others, Henderson, 'Hidden in Plain Sight'; Sabaratnam, 'Is IR Theory White?'; Hobson, 'The Twin Self-Delusions of IR'.

15. Sheila Nair, 'Edward W. Said and International Relations', *Millennium* 36, no. 1 (2007): 77–82; Shampa Biswas, 'Empire and Global Public Intellectuals: Reading Edward Said as an International Relations Theorist', *Millennium* 36, no. 1 (2007): 117–33. Other contributors are cited below. For earlier works, see Philip Darby and A. Paolini, 'Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism', *Alternatives* 19, no. 3 (1994): 371–93; Roxanne Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North–South Relations* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); L. H. M. Ling, *Postcolonial International Relations: Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Sankaran Krishna, 'Race, Amnesia and the Education of International Relations', *Alternatives* 26, no. 4 (2001): 401–24; Siba Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi-Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

16. Meera Sabaratnam 'Bring Up the Bodies: International Order, Empire, and Re-thinking the Great War (1914–1918) from Below', *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 3 (2023): 553–75; Alex Colas, 'International Political Sociology Through the Colonial Mirror: A Contrapuntal Reading of the Spanish Civil War', *International Political Sociology* 18, no. 2 (2024): 1–19.

application of Said's contrapuntal reading to the current conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine. By reading Palestine and Ukraine alongside each other, the article extends Said's work beyond Palestine and speaks to scholarship that aims to provincialise IR 'from the East'.<sup>17</sup> It provides a 'common vocabulary' that contributes to recent calls for a 'closer engagement between academics . . . working on the "Global East" and the "Global South"'.<sup>18</sup> This common vocabulary enables postcolonial scholars to set aside internal disagreements, such as on NATO's dualistic role,<sup>19</sup> and direct areas of agreement towards a coherent postcolonial strategy guided by humanist ideals.

The article proceeds in three steps. First, it outlines the strategy of offshore balancing and its account of the conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine. Second, it draws on Said's contrapuntal reading to offer an account that challenges the strategy's assumptions and conclusions about these conflicts. Third, it highlights the implications of this reading for the strategy's failure to meet its ultimate objective to safeguard US national security.

## Offshore Balancing in Palestine and Ukraine: A Restrained Strategy in the US National Interest

The offshore balancing strategy takes advantage of America's insular position to maintain its security at a minimum cost. America's insular position, proponents of the strategy argue, means that it is secure in the Western hemisphere. Beyond the Western hemisphere, America's security depends on balancing against potential regional hegemon. Where no regional hegemon is in sight, such as in the Middle East or Europe, the strategy stipulates that the United States should show 'restraint'. In the Middle East, this means military disengagement and ending the 'special relationship' with Israel. The strategy instead calls for an even-handed approach to a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In Europe, it means that NATO expansion was a mistake. The strategy calls for a recognition of Russia's security interests and concessions.

Offshore balancing emerges in neo-realist literature as an alternative restrained strategy in US foreign policy to the hubristic strategy of liberal hegemony. Walt and Mearsheimer, along with others,<sup>20</sup> critique the strategy of liberal hegemony for its hubristic call for expansive goals, such as the spread of democracy, in the attempt to make the world in America's image. This strategy is flawed, says Mearsheimer, because it leads to 'a highly interventionist foreign policy that involves fighting wars and doing significant social engineering in countries throughout the world' that end up in failure.<sup>21</sup> Examples of such failure include NATO expansion into Central and Eastern Europe, which explains

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17. Maria Mälksoo, 'Uses of "the East" in International Studies: Provincialising IR from Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 24 (2021): 811–9.
  18. Kseniya Oksamytna, 'Global Dialogues During the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26 (2023): 675.
  19. Somdeep Sen, 'NATO and the Global Colour Line', *International Affairs* 100, no. 2 (2024): 491–507; Siba Grovogui, 'Putin's Ukraine Aggression: How Should an African Respond?', *International Politics* 60, no. 1 (2023): 214–35; Jelena Subotic, 'Russia, NATO and the View from the East', *International Politics* 60, no. 1 (2023): 259–63.
  20. Among others, Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*; Rosato and Schuessler, 'A Realist Foreign Policy'; Posen, *Restraint*; Charles L. Glaser, 'A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept Is Misguided', *International Security* 2019; 43 (4): 51–87.
  21. John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (London: Yale University Press, 2018), 120.

'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault'.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, they include attempts at regime change across the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> To Walt, Mearsheimer and contemporary neo-realists such as Layne and Posen, liberal hegemony is the root cause of conflict across the world: from the 'forever wars' in the Middle East to the impact of these wars on the radicalisation of Al-Qaeda, the unnecessary antagonism with Iran and the blank cheque to allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia to act recklessly in Lebanon and Yemen.<sup>24</sup> These scholars thus suggest a more restrained alternative: offshore balancing.

The offshore balancing strategy, according to Layne, rejects the US 'preponderance' in a post-Cold War era where few problems in the world engage US vital interests.<sup>25</sup> Offshore balancing, Layne argues, 'eschews the ideological crusading on behalf of democracy' and is thus 'based on prudence and self-restraint in the conduct of US strategy'.<sup>26</sup> 'Instead of policing the world' this strategy proposes that 'the United States would encourage other countries to take the lead in checking rising powers, intervening itself only when necessary'.<sup>27</sup> Offshore balancing, Rosato and Schuessler write, implies that the US should 'balance against other great powers and to take a relaxed attitude toward minor powers'.<sup>28</sup> The strategy, therefore, should not be confused for isolationism, since it calls for America to maintain the balance of power and restore it when needed.<sup>29</sup> Offshore balancing is fundamentally a 'balance of power strategy', Layne says.<sup>30</sup> Contrary to liberal hegemony, the strategy implies that 'military power would remain central to U.S. national security, but its use would be as a last resort rather than a first impulse'.<sup>31</sup> In practice, this means that 'if there is no potential hegemon in sight' then 'there is little reason to deploy US ground or air forces'.<sup>32</sup> 'By pursuing a strategy of offshore balancing' Walt and Mearsheimer thus argue, 'Washington would forgo ambitious efforts to remake other societies and concentrate on what really matters: preserving U.S. dominance in the Western hemisphere and countering potential hegemonies in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf'.<sup>33</sup>

In the Persian Gulf, the key US interest to proponents of the strategy is unhindered access to oil.<sup>34</sup> To advance this interest, no power in the region should gain hegemony and monopolise this access. As the balance between the Sunni Gulf regimes (allied with Israel) on one side and Iran on the other is maintained, proponents of the strategy argue that this interest can

22. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault'.

23. Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 270.

24. Walt, 'US Grand Strategy After the Cold War', 16–7; Stephen Walt 'The Islamic Republic of Hysteria', *Foreign Policy*, 16 January 2018; Layne, 'From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing'; Rosato and Schuessler, 'A Realist Foreign Policy', 804; Posen, *Restraint*, 9–10.

25. Layne, 'From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing', 107–8.

26. Layne, 'America's Middle East Grand Strategy After Iraq', 8.

27. Mearsheimer and Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', 71.

28. Rosato and Schuessler, 'A Realist Foreign Policy', 813.

29. Stephen Walt, 'Restraint Isn't Isolationism – and It Won't Endanger America', *Foreign Policy*, 22 July 2019.

30. Layne, 'From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing', 113.

31. Stephen Walt, 'The End of Hubris and the New Age of American Restraint', *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (2019): 34.

32. Walt, 'US Grand Strategy After the Cold War', 14; Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 262.

33. Mearsheimer and Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', 71.

34. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 131; Posen, *Restraint*, 109; Mearsheimer and Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', 72; Layne, 'America's Middle East Grand Strategy After Iraq', 15.



be pursued from offshore. The United States should thus militarily disengage from the Middle East and end the 'special relationship' with Israel. 'What does offshore balancing say about US relations with Israel?' Mearsheimer and Walt ask, and they answer: 'It is time for the United States to treat Israel not as a special case but as a normal state'.<sup>35</sup> The proposal to treat Israel as a 'normal state' means 'Washington should be prepared to intervene if Israel's survival were ever threatened'.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the United States should be prepared to distance itself from Israel's policies that do not align with American values and interests.<sup>37</sup> Posen and Layne agree. The end of the special relationship, to Posen, means an end to the US 'subsidy' of Israeli expansion of settlements.<sup>38</sup> While 'the US has a moral commitment to Israel's existence that it must honour', Layne writes, 'as an offshore balancer, the US would also seek to reduce the widespread anti-Americanism in the Islamic world by taking an even-handed stance on relations between Israel and Palestine'.<sup>39</sup> As a 'normal state', Israel should receive support only in proportion with its survival needs. 'The United States can and I believe should' Posen writes, 'sell Israel the weapons it needs to deter attacks from enemy states'.<sup>40</sup> The United States should not, however, subsidise 'policies that are not in its interests'.<sup>41</sup> Proponents of offshore balancing such as Walt, Mearsheimer, Posen, and Layne thus call for an even-handed approach to a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.<sup>42</sup>

In Europe, proponents of offshore balancing argue that no power since the end of the Cold War has the ability to become a regional hegemon.<sup>43</sup> 'Germany and Russia are going to get relatively weaker over time' Walt reasons, 'because their populations are gradually declining and becoming considerably older, and no other potential hegemon is in sight'.<sup>44</sup> 'Russia', says Posen, 'certainly can make no bid to hegemony'.<sup>45</sup> Following the end of the Cold War, the United States should have thus 'steadily reduced its military presence, cultivated amicable relations with Russia, and turned European security over to the Europeans'.<sup>46</sup> NATO expansion was a mistake that antagonised Russia and neglected its security interests, leading to the crisis in Ukraine. 'Putin's pushback should have come as no surprise' writes Mearsheimer, 'after all, the West had been moving into Russia's backyard and threatening its core strategic interests'.<sup>47</sup> 'Imagine how the world might look like today had the United States embraced offshore balancing when the Cold War ended' asks Walt, 'for starters, there would have been no NATO expansion'.<sup>48</sup> In turn, Walt adds, this

35. Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israeli Lobby*, 341.

36. Ibid.

37. Stephen Walt, 'It's Time to End the Special Relationship with Israel' *Foreign Policy*, 27 May 2021, para.16. Available: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/27/its-time-to-end-the-special-relationship-with-israel/> (accessed 29 November 2025).

38. Posen, *Restraint*, 119.

39. Layne, 'America's Middle East Grand Strategy After Iraq', 23–4.

40. Posen, *Restraint*, 119.

41. Ibid.

42. Walt and Mearsheimer, *The Israeli Lobby*, 342–4; Posen, *Restraint*, 117; Layne, 'America's Middle East Grand Strategy After Iraq', 24.

43. Mearsheimer and Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', 76; Posen, *Restraint*, 87–90.

44. Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*, 269.

45. Posen, *Restraint*, 87.

46. Mearsheimer and Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing', 76; Posen, *Restraint*, 90; Layne, 'From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing', 124.

47. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault', 77–8; Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, 171.

48. Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*, 266.

‘would have avoided triggering Russian security fears, thereby removing its incentive to maintain “frozen conflicts” in Georgia, seize Crimea, and destabilise Ukraine’.<sup>49</sup> ‘Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the West’, Mearsheimer writes in his 2022 *Foreign Affairs* article (following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine),

Moscow did not invade Ukraine to conquer it and make it part of a Greater Russia. It was principally concerned with preventing Ukraine from becoming a Western bulwark on the Russian border. Putin and his advisers were especially concerned about Ukraine eventually joining NATO.<sup>50</sup>

Mearsheimer and Walt thus call for a Ukrainian ‘concession’ to ‘Russia’s legitimate concerns’.<sup>51</sup> Others agree with Mearsheimer and Walt that Russia is driven by security and was antagonised by NATO expansion. In line with Walt and Mearsheimer, these scholars, including Rosato, Posen, Layne, Lieven, and others, argue that ‘the Russian invasion was a rational act’ and that there is room for negotiations only if ‘each side would make painful concessions’.<sup>52</sup>

In sum, offshore balancing, according to its proponents, offers a sensible substitute for the hubristic strategy of liberal hegemony. A substitute that takes advantage of America’s insular position and protects its security at minimum cost. The strategy operates on the assumption that Israel and Russia are states like any others whose functions are to survive under anarchy. As neither state has the capability to become a regional hegemon, the strategy recommends military disengagement. This means ending the ‘special relationship’ with Israel and an even-handed approach to a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the case of Russia, it means concessions to address its security concerns. Is the assumption that Israel and Russia are states like any others – that is, driven by survival – congruent with the reality and history of these states and conflicts? The article turns to Said’s contrapuntal reading to offer an alternative account of these conflicts that challenges the strategy’s assumptions and conclusions.

## Contrapuntal Reading as a Method

This section outlines Said’s contrapuntal reading as a method in IR, before applying it to critique offshore balancing in Palestine and Ukraine. ‘Adopting contrapuntal reading as a method’ Pinar Bilgin writes, ‘is one way in which “intertwined and overlapping histories” of the coloniser and the colonised could be grasped’.<sup>53</sup> To grasp the ‘intertwined and overlapping histories’ of the coloniser and the colonised, the analysis should demonstrate an ‘awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other

49. Ibid., 267.

50. John Mearsheimer, ‘Playing with Fire in Ukraine’, *Foreign Affairs*, 17 August 2022, para 6.

51. Mearsheimer, ‘Playing with Fire in Ukraine’, para 7; Stephen Walt, ‘Friends in Need’, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 February 2023, para 12.

52. Anatol Lieven, ‘The Perilous Pursuit of Complete Victory in Ukraine’, *The American Prospect*, 10 October 2023; Barry Posen, ‘Ukraine’s Implausible theories of Victory’, *Foreign Affairs*, 8 July 2022, para 24; Layne and Schwarz, ‘Why Are We in Ukraine’; John Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato, ‘The Russian Invasion was a Rational Act’, *UnHerd*, 14 September 2023.

53. Pinar Bilgin, “‘Contrapuntal Reading’ as a Method, an Ethos, and a Metaphor for Global IR”, *International Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2016): 139.



histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts'.<sup>54</sup> In other words, it should situate historical and current events in the relations of empire and resistance that operate transnationally. In this reading, the state, whether Israel or Russia, is not a black-boxed unit whose internal politics is separate from its IR, but a 'contrapuntal ensemble' embedded in relations of empire and resistance, internally and externally, historically and in the present.<sup>55</sup>

In highlighting the transnational relations of empire and resistance, Said's contrapuntal reading challenges the discourse of empire that, in a myriad of ways, defines the 'other' in terms of a negation, a lack.<sup>56</sup> This discourse operates on the orientalist distinction, which Said critiques in *Orientalism*, between the 'orient' and the 'occident'.<sup>57</sup> In this distinction, Said writes, 'the oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike . . . the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"'.<sup>58</sup> The discourse of empire cages the orientalist other into an essentialised entity whose properties, of 'backwardness', 'irrationality', inability to self-govern, are internally ordained. Said's contrapuntal reading challenges this cultural and racial essentialism and its depoliticisation of the relations of empire and resistance – its reduction of these relations to cultural and racial stereotypes – by re-embedding them in the political and economic realities. If orientalism deprives the orient from the right to narrate itself,<sup>59</sup> a contrapuntal reading, by narrating these relational histories and realities, as Geeta Chowdhry argues, 'engender(s) the articulation of exiled voices into IR'.<sup>60</sup> It opens possibilities to engage with what Meera Sabaratnam refers to as 'histories from below'.<sup>61</sup> These histories entail longer time frames of imperial violence than reified accounts whose reference point, start and end dates, is the black-boxed state.

The article highlights these longer time frames of imperial violence in Palestine and Ukraine to challenge the account of these conflicts offered by proponents of offshore

54. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 59.

55. *Ibid.*, 60.

56. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 43. Sanjay Seth, 'Postcolonial theory and the critique of International Relations', in *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Sanjay Seth (London: Routledge, 2013), 15–31; Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3–4; Robbie Shilliam, *International Relations and Non-Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 2010), 3. Postcolonial scholars have shown the centrality of this master narrative in a range of contemporary issues, such as Bush Jr's 'war on civilisation', the discourse of the 'failed state', the Afghan 'tribe' and the meaning of the Arab Spring. Respectively, Philip Darby, 'Pursuing the Political: A Postcolonial Rethinking of Relations International', *Millennium* 33(1) (2004): 1–32; Branwen Gruffydd Jones, "'Good Governance" and "State Failure": Genealogies of Imperial Discourse', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2013): 49–70; Vivienne Jabri, *The Postcolonial Subject: Claiming Politics/Governing Others in Late Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2012), 135; Nivi Manchanda, 'The Imperial Sociology of the "Tribe" in Afghanistan', *Millennium* 46, no. 2 (2018): 165–89; Jasmine K. Gani, 'From Discourse to Practice: Orientalism, Western Policy and the Arab Uprisings', *International Affairs* 98, no. 1 (2022): 45–65.

57. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1977), 2.

58. *Ibid.*, 40.

59. *Ibid.*, 3.

60. Geeta Chowdhry, 'Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading: Implications for Critical Interventions in International Relations', *Millennium* 36, no. 1 (2007): 103.

61. Sabaratnam 'Bring Up the Bodies', 554.

balancing. The choice of the conflict in Palestine as a case study for the application of Said's contrapuntal reading is obvious: Said was a Palestinian American who originally applied this reading to Israeli settler colonialism. Why extend the reading to Ukraine? Two reasons: first, this is a case that proponents of offshore balancing most prominently critique since 2014 to vindicate the strategy's superiority over alternatives. It is therefore a strong case to showcase the inadequacy of the strategy. Second, reading Palestine and Ukraine in tandem is crucial for the contribution this article makes to addressing calls for a closer engagement between academics working on the 'Global South' and the 'Global East'.<sup>62</sup>

## Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Contrapuntal Reading

This section offers a contrapuntal reading of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It argues that Israel benefited from the imperial relations in which it was historically, and its conflict with the Palestinians today remains embedded. The discourse of empire, which legitimated Zionist settler colonial violence historically, continues to sustain Israel as a one-state settler colony. This reading challenges the assumption that Israel is a state like any other, seeking survival under anarchy. This assumption, on one hand, morally equalises the dispossessors and the dispossessed, while, on the other, obscures the fact that Israel is embarked on a settler colonial project that renders a two-state solution unviable.

To understand the success of the Zionist movement, past and present, it is crucial to examine how it benefited politically, demographically and economically from the imperial relations in which it was historically embedded. These relations, which form the genesis of Israel as a settler colonial state, date to the period of the British Mandate. The British Mandate over Palestine meant that 'for all intents and purposes, Britain owned the lands in which the Zionists . . . operated'.<sup>63</sup> While Zionism was not necessarily a colony of Britain but a 'satellite movement', the lack of a 'recognised mother country' did not mean that Zionism was not a colonial phenomenon; for Britain's strategy was 'to endorse the slow construction of a Jewish community in Palestine, with the hope that it could be integrated into a new Anglo-Arab Middle Eastern political system'.<sup>64</sup> Thus, 'the Jewish national homeland was built and survived due to British imperial support. Had London wished otherwise, the Jewish state would have been a *fait accompli* in 1917'.<sup>65</sup>

1917 is the date of the Balfour Declaration. 'What is important about the declaration' Said writes, is that it

was made (a) by a European power, (b) about a non-European territory, (c) in a flat disregard of both the presence and the wishes of the native majority resident in that territory, and (d) it took the form of a promise about this same territory to another foreign group, so that this foreign group might, quite literally, *make* this territory a national home for the Jewish people.<sup>66</sup>

'For the inhabitants of Palestine' writes Rashid Khalidi in *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, 'Balfour's careful, calibrated prose was in effect a gun pointed directly at their

62. Oksamytna, 'Global Dialogues', 675.

63. Ilan Pappé, 'Zionism as Colonialism: A Comparative View of Diluted Colonialism in Asia and Africa', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (2008): 627.

64. *Ibid.*, 628.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York, NY: Random House, 1980), 15–6; emphasis in original.

heads, a declaration of war by the British Empire on the indigenous population'.<sup>67</sup> The policy made Zionism its key beneficiary demographically. While 'the natural increase in population is normally 1.5 percent a year' Said says, 'the Jews in Palestine between 1922 and 1946 were increasing at an average of 9.0 percent annually, helped by the British policy of forcing a Jewish majority on the country. In the year 1927 alone the increase reached the figure of 28.7 percent, and in 1934 it reached 25.9 percent'.<sup>68</sup>

British imperial policy also benefited Israeli settler colonialism economically. 'The British government' writes Ilan Pappé, 'encouraged the heads of the Zionist project to be self-sufficient economically and entrusted to them the natural resources of the land'.<sup>69</sup> This led to the segregation of the Zionist economy from the Palestinian, and 'a Jewish economic enclave was created'. 'The economic enclave' Pappé continues,

was protected by the empire, which acted as a classical colonialist mother country. The natural resources of Palestine . . . were not exploited by any rival colonialist empire, and the same applied to the finance and real estate markets, which were defended against greedy profiteers from the outside.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to the Zionist settlements, British policy towards Palestinians ran similarly to other parts of the British Empire, with limited modernisation and economic thriftiness.

How were such policies justified? British imperialists and Zionists shared the view that the Arabs were 'uncivilised orientals'. In the 'backward' societies the colonists encountered, whether European settlers or American Westward expansionists, these assumptions meant that lands were declared empty, up for grabs and cultivation. As Said explains,

Millions of acres outside metropolitan Europe were declared empty, their people and societies decreed to be obstacles to progress and development, their space just as assertively declared open to European white settlers and their civilising exploitation . . . Everything in those territories that suggested waste, disorder, uncounted resources, was to be converted into productivity, order, taxable, potentially developed wealth.<sup>71</sup>

Zionism extended these assumptions to Palestinians.<sup>72</sup> Settler colonialism in Palestine became acceptable in the Western imaginary because Arabs were 'orientals', namely incapable of productivity, rationality and self-government. 'Certainly so far as the West is concerned' in Said's words, 'Palestine has been a place where a relatively advanced (because European) incoming population of Jews has performed miracles of construction and civilising and has fought brilliantly successful technical wars against what was always portrayed as a dumb, essentially repellent population of uncivilised Arab natives'.<sup>73</sup> 'The Arabs' the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, repeats this narrative in a recent interview, 'left [the land] barren, they never made it their own . . . practically it was an empty land . . . the Jews came back in the nineteenth century . . . The result of this return was that we started building farms, factories and places of

67. Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 71.

68. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, p.17-18.

69. Pappé, 'Zionism as Colonialism', 629.

70. Ibid.

71. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, 78.

72. Ibid., 69.

73. Ibid., 8.

employment'.<sup>74</sup> Settler colonialism, in the discourse of empire, substitutes conquest for discovery; expropriation for productivity.

Israel, as a settler colony, thus benefited from the imperial relations in which it was historically embedded. These benefits extend to the UN 1947 'partition plan'. According to the plan, 'the Jews, who owned less than six per cent of the total land area of Palestine and constituted no more than one third of the population, were handed more than half of its overall territory'.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the plan incorporated illegally held land into the Jewish state,

After 1940, when the mandatory authority restricted Jewish land ownership to specific zones inside Palestine, there continued to be illegal buying (and selling) within the 65 percent of the total area restricted to Arabs. Thus when the partition plan was announced in 1947 it included land held illegally by Jews, which was incorporated as a *fait accompli* inside the borders of the Jewish state.<sup>76</sup>

It is therefore understandable why Palestinians boycotted the UN plan. The boycott, meanwhile, gave an advantage to the Israeli leadership, which itself had no intention to accept the UN plan. The plan would have meant that the Jewish state should reside over 56% of the land that includes 438,000 Palestinians in a population of 900,000, and Jerusalem would be internationally governed, both of which the Israeli leadership rejected. The advantage presented by the Palestinian boycott lay in the fact that the Israeli leadership could 'accept' the plan with no intent or need to abide by it. As Pappé puts it in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*,

The categorical rejection of the scheme by the Arab governments and the Palestinian leadership made it undoubtedly easier for Ben-Gurion to believe that he could both accept the plan and work against it. Already in October 1947, before the resolution was adopted, Ben-Gurion clarified to his friends in the leadership that if the map of the partition plan were not satisfactory, the Jewish state would not be obliged to accept it.<sup>77</sup>

In other words, the two-state solution was doomed from the start. The objective of the Israeli leadership since 1948 is to maintain, rather than abolish or alter, the one-state settler colonial reality.<sup>78</sup> To maintain the permanent reality of Israel as an illegal settler colony with a hierarchy in citizenship, a one-state reality is legally arranged in such a manner as to *seem* temporary, an 'unresolved' two-state solution. As Barnett et al explain,

74. 'The Biggest Lie in the Palestine vs. Israel Debate', 11 December 2022. Full Interview. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xLkjvZDsIU&ab\\_channel=JordanBPetersonClips](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xLkjvZDsIU&ab_channel=JordanBPetersonClips). Last accessed 11 December 2023.

75. Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 34.

76. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, 98.

77. Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 36.

78. This is done through sabotaging the peace process and excluding any discussion of the 1948 refugee problem from this process. On the exclusion of the refugee problem, see Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 239–47. On the history of Israel sabotaging the 1993 Oslo Accords, see Norman Finkelstein, *Gaza: An Inquest into its Martyrdom* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 27. On the history of Israeli lobby sabotaging Bush's 2002 'Road Map' for two-state solution and Saudi peace plan in 2006, see John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 204–28.

Controlling territory and consolidating institutional domination without formalising sovereignty enables Israel to maintain a one-state reality on its terms. It can deny responsibility for (and rights to) most Palestinians because they are residents of its territory but not citizens of the state, cynically justifying this discrimination on the grounds that it keeps alive the possibility of a two-state solution. By not formalising sovereignty, Israel can be democratic for its citizens but unaccountable to millions of its residents.<sup>79</sup>

The goal is to keep Palestinians in a liminal space that obscures their legal rights to resist settler colonialism under international humanitarian law.<sup>80</sup>

The American Empire today substitutes the British Empire in sustaining Israeli settler colonialism. This role is played through a sustained delivery of military aid, as well as legal and diplomatic cover for Israel's colonial war in institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and the International Criminal Court. Orientalism, the discourse that masquerades as 'Israel is a democracy', continues to legitimate US support for Israel's violence against Palestinians. On 4 April 2024, Israeli government spokesperson, Avi Hyman, advanced this discourse, of Western/Israeli civilisation versus Arab/Palestinian terrorists, when asked in the media about the Israeli bombing of three aid convoys that killed, among others, three British citizens.<sup>81</sup> 'Israel is a democratic state guided by very humanitarian principles' the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, repeated, 'and so we can be certain that the Israeli army will respect the rules that arise from international law in everything it does'.<sup>82</sup>

Such discourse distracts from the fact that Israel is embarked on a colonial war that began over 70 years ago. In framing the conflict in terms of democracy/civilisation versus terrorism/barbarism, it represents the latest iteration of what Dag Tuastad refers to as the 'new barbarism thesis'; a thesis that depoliticises the conflict by rooting it in the Palestinians' 'cultural backwardness', rather than political and economic reality, 'be it colonialism, ethnic cleansing or occupation'.<sup>83</sup> A reality of what Barkawi refers to as 'permanent war' waged against those whose lands have been, and remain, expropriated.<sup>84</sup> Contrary to the cultural and racial essentialism advanced by the 'new barbarism thesis', Said's contrapuntal reading, by emphasising the global context of empire, repoliticises the conflict. This reading critiques the reification of the Gaza war through setting arbitrary dates for the 'peace' that existed before it. Such reification occludes the enduring violence of imperial ordering when there is allegedly 'peace'. Said's contrapuntal reading, by contrast, renders visible the violence of settler colonialism by expanding the

79. Michael Barnett et al., 'Israel's One-State Reality', *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (2023): 125.

80. Victoria Mason, 'The "Question of Palestine": From Liminality to Emancipation', *Review of International Studies* 47, no. 1 (2021): 120; Michael Sfard, 'Israel Is Officially Annexing the West Bank', *Foreign Policy*, 8 June 2023; Dahlia Scheindlin and Yael Berda, 'Israel's Annexation of West Bank Has Already Begun', *Foreign Affairs*, 9 June 2023.

81. For example, LBC, 'Nick Ferrari Challenges Israeli Spokesperson over Death of Three British Aid Workers', 4 April 2024. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPfFmq5T0pg&ab\\_channel=LBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPfFmq5T0pg&ab_channel=LBC). Last accessed 4 April 2024.

82. Reported in Lili Bayer, 'EU Leaders Reach Agreement on Middle East – As It Happened', *The Guardian*, 26 October 2023.

83. Dag Tuastad, 'Neo-Orientalism and the New Barbarism Thesis: Aspects of Symbolic Violence in the Middle East Conflict(s)', *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2003): 595–6.

84. Barkawi, 'Decolonising War', 205. For an earlier critique of Walt's state-centric conception of war, see Tarak Barkawi, 'From War to Security: Security Studies, the Wider Agenda and the Fate of the Study of War', *Millennium* 39, no. 3 (2011): 701–16.

war beyond this reified view. Thus, a contrapuntal reading of the current mass killing in Gaza tells a story not of an event that began in 2023, but, in the words of a Palestinian resident of Gaza coming out of the rubble of his bombed home, ‘a second Nakba’.<sup>85</sup> The first Nakba, in 1948, which equally displaced the Palestinian population, was no less an unfortunate, yet unavoidable, tragedy of war. Rather, it was carefully planned to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian population. Arab villages were studied well before the 1948 war, and ‘precise details were recorded about . . . each village, its access roads, quality of land, water springs, main sources of income, its sociopolitical composition, religious affiliations, names of its *mukhtars* . . . the age of individual men, and much more’.<sup>86</sup> As Pappé, who recounts these details, concludes,

It is not that the Zionist movement, in creating its nation-state, waged a war that ‘tragically but inevitably’ led to the expulsion of ‘parts of the indigenous population’. Rather, it is the other way round: the objective was the ethnic cleansing of the country the movement coveted for its new state, and the war was the *consequence*, the *means* to carry it out.<sup>87</sup>

The leaders who conducted this planning were hailed as ‘the heroes of the Jewish war of independence’, which included former Israeli PM ‘David Ben-Gurion, in whose private home all the chapters in the ethnic cleansing scheme were discussed and finalised’.<sup>88</sup> Nor is, today, the US president’s call to remove the Palestinian population to Egypt and Jordan,<sup>89</sup> an ‘unintended consequence’ of the war in Gaza. It is an attempt to complete a settler colonial project of ethnic cleansing that began over 70 years ago.

If the imperial past remains enduring in the settler colonial reality of the present, there ought to be a moral distinction between the dispossessors and the dispossessed. ‘It is a grotesque notion’ Said reminds us, ‘to ask the victims to forget about their past and plan to live together as inferior citizens with their conquerors’.<sup>90</sup> Given the settler colonial reality of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the ‘equality in rationality’ clause that sets ‘right against right’, so central to neo-realist theory, is ‘the biggest distortion of all’.<sup>91</sup> For it supposes that one equates ‘the “right” of a largely European people to come to Palestine, pretend that it was empty of inhabitants, conquer it by force, and drive out 70 percent of its inhabitants, with the right of the native people of Palestine to resist these actions and try to remain on their land’.<sup>92</sup> The assumption that states are alike in their function to survive under anarchy, in effect, morally equalises the dispossessors and the dispossessed. The reality of settler colonialism shows that Israel is not a state motivated by survival alongside a Palestinian state, even an unjustly imposed one through a then inexperienced UN. This explains why scholars such as Said, Pappé and others understand the idealism of the ‘two-state solution’. By situating the conflict in its imperial context, they recognise

85. Mohammed Mhawesh, ‘“A Second Nakba”: Echoes of 1948, as Israel Orders Palestinians to Leave’, *Al-Jazeera*, 13 October 2023.

86. Ilan Pappé, ‘The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine’, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36, no. 1 (2006): 11.

87. Pappé, ‘The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine’, 17–8; emphasis in original.

88. Pappé, ‘The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine’, 18.

89. Alice Cuddy and Jon Donnison, ‘Trump Wants Neighbours to Take in Palestinians to “Clean Out” Gaza’, *BBC News*, Jerusalem, 26 January 2025.

90. Edward Said, *Peace and Its Discontents* (New York, NY: Random House, 1996), 132.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid.



that the 'two-state' is not a serious solution but a strategy to silence the critics of a settler colonial reality defined by racial hierarchy and Palestinian liminality.<sup>93</sup> Instead, Said, Pappé, and other critics advocate for equal rights under one 'civic and democratic state'.<sup>94</sup> 'I see no other way' Said wrote in 1999, 'than to begin now to speak about sharing the land that has thrust us together, sharing it in a truly democratic way, with equal rights for each citizen'.<sup>95</sup> 'Equal rights for each citizen' is in line with Said's humanism; the notion that all humans are of equal worth; that neither race nor religion determines one's fate; that racial hierarchy is a recipe for endless war, ethnic cleansing or genocide.

Proponents of offshore balancing draw on the same assumption – of survival under anarchy – to blame Russia's invasion of Ukraine on NATO expansion and call for concessions to resolve the crisis. It is to this case that the article now turns.

## Ukraine-Russia Conflict: A Contrapuntal Reading

This section presents a contrapuntal reading of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. It argues that this is another example of a conflict embedded in the history of (Russian) imperialism and (Ukrainian) anti-imperial resistance. This history presents a longer timescale of imperial violence than 2022 or 2014, and showcases that Russia is engaged in a colonial war to reassert the hierarchy of its imperial order. The discourse of empire, which legitimated the Russian imperial order historically, continues to sustain Russia's war in Ukraine today. This reading challenges the assumption that Russia is driven by the desire to survive under anarchy. The assumption morally equalises the dispossessors and the dispossessed, while obscuring Russia's imperial ambitions that are unlikely to be assuaged by Ukrainian concessions.

A contrapuntal reading of the conflict in Ukraine begins with outlining the context of the empire in which it is embedded. Empire is not a monolith; it cuts across different histories and takes various forms in different contexts.<sup>96</sup> Russia is a 'Janus-faced racialised empire' writes Madina Tlostanova, 'which feels itself a colony in the presence of the West and

93. Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 253–5; Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* trans. David Thorstat (London: Pathfinder Press, 1973); Patrick Wolfe, 'New Jews for Old: Settler State Formation and the Impossibility of Zionism: In Memory of Edward W. Said', *Arena Journal* 37/38 (2012): 285–321; Lorenzo Veracini, 'The Other Shift: Settler Colonialism, Israel and the Occupation', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 42, no. 2 (2013): 26–42; Laurie King-Irani, 'Exiled to a Liminal Legal Zone: Are We All Palestinians Now?', *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (2006): 923–36.

94. Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 256; Barnett et al., 'Israel's One-State Reality'; Mason, 'The "Question of Palestine"'. It is worth mentioning that in a recent interview Mearsheimer accepts that the two-state is not a viable solution anymore. John Mearsheimer, 'Rebuilding Gaza & A Deal with Putin', 12 February 2025. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yfNdkStoo&t=1525s>. Last accessed 3 March 2025. Unlike Said and Pappé and other scholars cited in this section, Mearsheimer is yet to accept the reality of the one democratic state.

95. Edward Said, 'The One-State Solution', *New York Times*, 10 January 1999. This followed the failure of the 1993 Oslo Accords. On the history of Israel sabotaging these Accords see Finkelstein, *Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom*, 27.

96. Russia, for example, has been deemed as a 'second-class empire' in relation to the West. See Madina Tlostanova, 'Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 2 (2012): 137.

plays the part of a caricature civiliser mimicking European colonization models and missions in its own non-European colonies'.<sup>97</sup> Russian imperialism generates 'mutant forms of the main vices of modernity – secondary Eurocentrism, secondary orientalism, secondary racism'.<sup>98</sup> This 'secondary orientalism' reinforces the idea of 'Russian supremacy and Ukrainian "inferiority"', an idea that has 'prevailed in Russia for centuries and were accentuated by Russian media recently'.<sup>99</sup> 'In historical and contemporary Russian literature, media, and societal discourses' writes Kseniya Oksamytna, 'Ukrainians have consistently been portrayed as backwards, indolent, and selfish – and thus in need of imperial guidance'.<sup>100</sup> Russian orientalist discourse portrays the Ukrainian people as 'backward', 'unsophisticated', and Ukraine as a 'failed state' oppressing its Russian-speaking population, with no national history and lacking in capacity to resist Putin's 2022 invasion.<sup>101</sup>

Russia's war in Ukraine, therefore, cannot simply be seen from the viewpoint of survival in a state-centric anarchical world. As Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel argue, Putin's view of Russia is ethno-civilisationalist; ethnic Russians are a 'state forming people' with a 'great mission' and Russia is a 'unique civilisation to which traditional notions of nation-state do not apply'.<sup>102</sup> In this view, the history of the Ukrainian nation is defined by its absence. In his 'historical unity' speech, as Russian forces gathered on Ukraine's border and prepared to invade, Putin argued that 'the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians started' historically 'among the Polish elite and a part of the Malorussian intelligentsia'.<sup>103</sup> In more recent times, 'Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era'.<sup>104</sup> The Ukrainian nation, from this standpoint, is an instrument of foreign elites or a gift of foreign powers.

Russian policies of Ukrainian national erasure remain enduring in Ukrainian historical memory. For example, in the Soviet era, Stalin's 1932–3 famine in Ukraine (known in Ukraine as Holodomor) was deemed a 'common tragedy' of the people of the USSR. The subject of the famine was suppressed in this era, and 'the very fact of the famine remained a taboo'.<sup>105</sup> During glasnost in Ukraine, an alternative reading of the famine emerged, raising the 'anti-Ukrainian nature of the famine, and not only its anti-[peasant] class nature'.<sup>106</sup> In this interpretation,

97. Madina Tlostanova, 'Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference', *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 2 (2015): 47.

98. Tlostanova, 'Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial?', 135. Jasmine Gani defines this process as 'fleeing' and 'transferral' of orientalist stigma from oneself to an 'inferior other'. Jasmine Gani, 'Racial Militarism and Civilizational Anxiety at the Imperial Encounter: From Metropole to the Postcolonial State', *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 6 (2021): 546–66.

99. Kseniya Oksamytna, 'Imperialism, Supremacy, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2023): 508.

100. *Ibid.*, 497–8.

101. Olesya Khromeychuk, 'Why the West Underestimated Ukraine', *New Statesman*, 20 December 2022.

102. Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024), 44.

103. Vladimir Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', *President of Russia*, 12 July 2021, para 26.

104. *Ibid.*, para 44.

105. Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, 91.

106. *Ibid.*

Ukrainians constituted a disproportionate number among famine victims and . . . Stalin's use of famine to break the resistance of the Ukrainian peasants to collectivisation was . . . a policy aimed at breaking any national resistance by the Ukrainians against the Soviet state . . . the famine was followed by a terror campaign eliminating a swath of the Ukrainian cultural intelligentsia and political cadre. The famine was thus an act of deliberate destruction of the Ukrainian nation.<sup>107</sup>

Since 2006, Holodomor has been recognised as a genocide by Ukraine, a view that today has 'virtually universal agreement among Ukrainians'.<sup>108</sup> The memory of the imperial past is enduring. This memory guards against the uncritical acceptance of 'the myth of Russian imperial innocence' and its long standing 'imperial view that Russian rule over non-Russian populations is not colonialism', thus overlooking 'the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary fascist Russia'.<sup>109</sup> The myth of Russian imperial innocence has a long history; for example, the Soviet Union masqueraded colonisation in Central Asia as 'friendship' in the common struggle against imperial capitalism.<sup>110</sup> This 'friendship' was couched in the orientalist discourse of progress and policies of assimilation aimed at the elimination of indigenous cultures.<sup>111</sup> As early as the 1920s, Lenin's policy on nationalities was displaced with campaigns against indigenous populations informed ideologically by 'Marxist belief in progress'.<sup>112</sup> 'Russianness' thus, 'became synonymous with progress' and 'ethnic Russians enjoyed greater mobility and privileged access to resources' while, 'for non-Russians, social mobility and access to privileges could be obtained through cultural erasure and assimilation'.<sup>113</sup> Selbi Durdiyeva refers to this phenomenon as 'civilizational communism' where, 'the communist message was distributed through erasure of people, their worlds, cultures and cosmologies, in the name of utopian promise, the benefits of which were to be reaped by the few selected elites'.<sup>114</sup>

The breakup of the Soviet Union in this context was a tragedy for Russian imperialism. Since the breakup, Russia employed political and economic means for the purpose of altering Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, 'Ukraine has been subject

107. Ibid., 92.

108. Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, 94. Raphael Lemkin, who invented the term, called the case 'the classic example of Soviet genocide?' cited in Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 53.

109. Tereza Hendl et al., '(En)Countering Epistemic Imperialism: A Critique of "Westspaining" and Coloniality in Dominant Debates on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy* 45 (2024): 11.

110. Ibid., 12.

111. Mark von Hagen, 'Does Ukraine Have a History?', *Slavic Review* 54, no. 3 (1995): 664.

112. Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-ethnic History* (London: Routledge, 2014), 376.

113. Botakoz Kassymbekova and Aminat Chokobaeva, 'Expropriation, Assimilation, Elimination: Understanding Soviet Settler Colonialism', *South/South Dialogues*, 5 July 2023; also Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 129.

114. Selbi Durdiyeva, "'Not in Our Name": Why Russia Is Not a Decolonial Ally or the Dark Side of Civilizational Communism and Imperialism', *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 29 May 2023.

115. Jan Dutkiewicz and Jan Smolenski, 'Epistemic Superimposition: The War in Ukraine and the Poverty of Expertise in International Relations Theory', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26, no. 1 (2023): 623.

to Russian coercion virtually from the moment of the USSR's dissolution'.<sup>116</sup> In the 1994 Ukrainian presidential election, Yeltsin supported Ukrainian candidate Leonid Kuchma on the basis that his campaign promised closer ties with Russia, in contrast to the then President Kravchuk, who tilted Ukraine more towards the West by signing up for NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) program. When Kuchma failed to deliver on the promise of rapprochement in office, Russia 'imposed new customs duties on Ukrainian goods and disconnected Ukraine from Russia's power grid. In addition, Moscow stepped up its efforts to maintain a hold over the Crimean Peninsula and the Black Sea Fleet based there'.<sup>117</sup> In the 2004 election, Russia provided significant political and economic support to Putin's favoured candidate, Yanukovych. The Kremlin did not only finance his campaign, ensuring 'that Yanukovych had enough money to spend an enormous sum on advertising, smear campaigns and the bribing of officials' but also 'lowered petrol costs by an amount equivalent to US\$800m, helping Yanukovych raise the resources to lubricate voters by doubling pensions just two months before the first round of the elections', a move, that 'for the first time, brought Yanukovych into the lead in the presidential race'.<sup>118</sup> When the economic means failed, and the Maidan protests resulted in the ousting of Yanukovych, the 2014 invasion of Crimea followed.

Russia's war against Ukraine thus began long before the 2014 annexation of Crimea and 2022 invasion, as 'Putin employed espionage, finance, disinformation, and other political means to penetrate Ukraine and govern it through clients before turning to military power'.<sup>119</sup> Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are part of larger story of imperial violence, conducted formally through war, and informally through coercion in times of 'peace'. The idea that Russia's aggression is related to NATO expansion is refuted by the history of the 'pull-push dynamic of Russia's re-imperialisation'.<sup>120</sup> There was no appetite in the West for Ukraine to join NATO during the Bucharest memorandum.<sup>121</sup> What antagonised Russia was Ukraine 'daring to act on the international scene without deferring to Russia'.<sup>122</sup> In other words, to the Russian empire, Ukraine, the 'younger brother', could not be, let alone act as, an independent nation. When Ukraine, under Yushchenko, attempted to de-vassalise the country by bringing it closer to the West, Russia did not only 'cut off supplies to Ukraine twice in 2005–6 and 2008–9' but also pursued a strategy 'to paint Ukraine as an unreliable energy transport partner in the eyes of Europe' with the aim to reduce 'Ukraine's importance to the West and making it increasingly dependent on Russia'.<sup>123</sup> This dynamic, over time, shaped Ukrainian and Russian societies, drifting them apart and finally leading to war. Furthermore, the war itself reinforced civic national identity among Ukrainians and raised the popularity of joining the EU and NATO. The popularity of EU membership

116. Ibid., 622.

117. Elias Götz, 'Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine Policy, 1991–Present', *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 308.

118. Jakob Tolstrup, 'Black Knights and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes', *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (2015): 682.

119. Tarak Barkawi, 'War and Decolonization in Ukraine', *New Perspectives* 30, no. 4 (2022): 318.

120. Popova and Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine*, 127.

121. Ibid., 129.

122. Ibid.

123. Ibid., 131.

rose from 47% in 2013 to 81% in July 2022, while the popularity of NATO membership rose from 20% in 2009 to 86% in 2023.<sup>124</sup>

A contrapuntal reading of the conflict in Ukraine thus reveals a deeper reality to the surface level appearance of a war between two nation-states. This is the reality of imperial violence, which takes a variety of economic and political coercive forms. When coercion fails, it bursts into a colonial war to restore racial and civilisational hierarchy. Features of Russia's colonial war in Ukraine can be seen in the conduct of the war itself. An important feature is the erasure of Ukrainian identity and reassertion of racial and civilisational hierarchy. Reports from the war reveal a campaign of cultural and educational Russification in Meriopol and Bergansk, while 'at least 14 memorials commemorating the victims of Holodomor were dismantled in the communities of Oleshky and Ivanivka in Kherson Oblast'.<sup>125</sup> 'Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine' Jade McGlynn concludes, 'is aimed not only at territorial control, but also at the eradication of Ukrainian national identity'.<sup>126</sup> Erasure of Ukrainian national identity, as well as colonial history, of which the genocide in Holodomor is a manifestation.

In the postcolonial story, Ukraine and Russia are therefore not alike in their functions. There is a distinction between those fighting for their survival and those who aim to build ethno-civilisational states for the purpose of imperial hierarchy and racial domination. A contrapuntal reading showcases that the 'war' is part of a larger story of imperial violence, which will not end following a Ukrainian 'concession' to 'Russia's legitimate concerns'.<sup>127</sup> A postcolonial reading of the conflict does not exhibit such optimism. 'An undefeated Russia' postcolonial scholars argue, 'would be unlikely to stop its attempts to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and destroy the Ukrainian nation even if it is granted territorial concessions'.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, the argument for Ukrainian concessions, 'side-steps many difficult questions' including,

What will happen to Ukrainians in the occupied territories who face torture, sexual violence, dispossession, and denial of political and cultural rights? . . . Will Russia face prosecution for the crimes it has committed and compensate Ukraine? Finally, how can one ensure that Russia does not re-launch its invasion of Ukraine?<sup>129</sup>

By emphasising the dynamic of re-imperialisation and resistance, postcolonial scholars reach the opposite conclusion that had NATO expanded to Ukraine, it would have deterred Russia.<sup>130</sup>

124. Jennifer Mathers, 'How Russia's War is Changing How Ukraine Thinks', *Political Insight*, June 2023, p. 17.

125. Jade McGlynn, 'Russia Is Committing Cultural Genocide in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 23 April 2024, para 16; see also Kseniya Oksamytna, 'Russia's Status as a Colonial Power', *E-International Relations*, 1 November 2024.

126. McGlynn, 'Russia Is Committing Cultural Genocide in Ukraine', para 31.

127. Mearsheimer, 'Playing with Fire in Ukraine', para 7; Walt, 'Friends in Need'.

128. Kseniya Oksamytna, 'The Moral and Strategic Clarity of Supporting Ukraine's Self-Defense: Why Accepting Russian Colonialism Should Remain a Taboo', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 42, no. 7 (2024): 1134.

129. Ibid.

130. These scholars include Popova, Shevel, Oksamytna, and others cited in this section. See also Subotic, 'Russia, NATO and the View from the East'; Maria Malksoo, 'The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War Against Ukraine', *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, no. 3–4 (2023): 480.

But why should this postcolonial critique matter to IR scholars, particularly neo-realist scholars? Even if states are not functionally alike, why should proponents of offshore balancing not ignore such theoretico-historical inaccuracies and carry on with a strategy that assesses US national security based on the capabilities of adversaries? Is not the assessment of capabilities, after all, the decisive factor in establishing whether or not a state beyond the Western hemisphere can threaten America's survival? The article now turns to these questions to problematise the offshore balancing strategy's assessment of US national security solely based on other states' capabilities.

## Why a Contrapuntal Reading Matters to IR Scholars and Policymakers

Offshore balancing offers a 'great power view' of the conflicts in the Middle East and Europe. This view asks: are hegemonies likely to rise in these regions? This is ultimately a question about the capabilities of the powers in these regions. Should US foreign policy be solely driven by an assessment of capabilities in Palestine and Ukraine? A contrapuntal reading shows that an assessment of the conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine today, solely based on capabilities, harms US national security and threatens the survival of the United States as a liberal democracy.

A key problem with the offshore balancing strategy's omission of the imperial context and reliance on capabilities is the failure to distinguish between states with imperial ambitions and states whose aim is to survive. Earlier realists are careful not to reduce *all* states to 'like units'. Walter Lippmann, for instance, sees the distinction between friend and foes as crucial for national security; it matters for US survival that Britain, not Germany, won the war.<sup>131</sup> The distinction between imperial and non-imperial policy matters to Hans Morgenthau, who writes in *Politics Among Nations*, 'a nation that mistakes a policy of imperialism for a policy of the status quo will be unprepared to meet the threat to its own existence which the other nation's policy entails . . . a nation that mistakes a policy of the status quo for a policy of imperialism will evoke through its disproportionate reaction the very danger of war which it is trying to avoid'.<sup>132</sup> In Ukraine, Mearsheimer, Walt, and the neo-realists who call for appeasement find themselves in the paradoxical position of sacrificing allies in Europe in support of Russian imperial policy. In Daniel Drezner's words, 'Mearsheimer undersells the importance of Europe and oversells the importance of Russia. . . European and Pacific Rim allies are far more important than Russia as components of any balancing coalition against China. The response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is more likely to foster cooperation against China as well'.<sup>133</sup> As a potential regional hegemon, balancing against China is a vital US interest to proponents of offshore balancing.<sup>134</sup> By abandoning European allies, the strategy undermines cooperation against

131. Walter Lippman, *US Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co, 1943), 70.

132. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 1978), 530.

133. Daniel Drezner, 'Can Realism Explain the War in Ukraine', *The Washington Post*, 3 March 2022, para 10.

134. Christopher Layne, 'China's Role in American Grand Strategy: Partner, Regional Power, or Great Power Rival?', in *The Asia-Pacific: A Region of Transitions*, ed. Jim Rolfe (Honolulu, HI: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2003), 80; John Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail:



China.<sup>135</sup> The assumption that states are ‘like units’, namely a historical and moral analysis of aggressor and victim is less relevant, and strategy can be based solely on an assessment of capabilities, at best, offers an insufficient guide for US national security. At worst, when it aligns itself with imperial policies of other states, it alienates allies who share similar values to the United States and undermines US national security.

The assessment of US foreign policy solely based on capabilities does not only harm US national security, but also threatens the survival of the United States as a liberal democracy. A major insight of Said’s contrapuntal reading is the co-constitution of the relations of empire and resistance on the transnational level. This means that these relations cannot be contained within the state-centric frame. Indeed, the role of the Israel lobby identified by proponents of offshore balancing already shows that the relations of empire are transnational; that the United States is not a ‘black-box’.<sup>136</sup> The problem, however, is not that the two-state solution is failing due to the lobby and US failure to take a more ‘even-handed approach’ to advancing this solution.<sup>137</sup> The problem, rather, is that the ‘unresolved’ two-state solution is itself a strategy to silence critics of settler colonial racial hierarchy and Palestinian liminality – in short, resistance to empire. The resistance to empire, like the empire, does not trim itself to the spatial structure of the inter-state system. It is embedded in a transnational network of relations that can be seen, for example, in the mass protests across metropolitan cities over the occupied and racially dispossessed in Palestine. The protests show that, as postcolonial scholars argue, colonial or ‘small’ wars have generative features for society and politics in the metropole.<sup>138</sup> Biden’s campaign was concerned about the ‘uncommitted voters’ whose protest may bring about regime change in the United States.<sup>139</sup> In the United Kingdom and Germany, mass protests over Gaza led to tightening of anti-extremism laws that curbed freedom of

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The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order’, *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–50; Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 268; Posen, *Restraint*, 17–8.

135. ‘The United States’ Mearsheimer writes, ‘will want to keep European countries from selling dual-use technologies to China and to help put economic pressure on Beijing when necessary. In return, US military forces will remain in Europe, keeping NATO alive and continuing to serve as the pacifier in that region. Given that virtually every European leader would like to see that happen, the threat of leaving should give the United States significant leverage in getting the Europeans to cooperate on the economic front against China’. Mearsheimer, ‘Bound to Fail’, 48–9. The problem with abandoning Ukraine to Russia’s ‘legitimate interests’ is that this is also an abandonment of Europe and America’s leverage as Mearsheimer summarises it here.
136. Walt and Mearsheimer, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*. Bacevich protests that the US ‘became Israel’. Andrew Bacevich, *Twilight of the American Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 349; Andrew Bacevich, ‘Israel Is Not America’s Responsibility’, *The Nation*, 15 December 2023.
137. Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*, 268. Mearsheimer, a long proponent of the two-state solution, became particularly pessimistic in recent years. Freddie Sayers, ‘John Mearsheimer: There Is No Two State Solution’, *UnHerd*, 16 December 2023. Available: <https://unherd.com/2023/12/john-mearsheimer-there-is-no-two-state-solution/>. Last accessed 30 July 2025.
138. Barkawi, ‘Decolonising War’, 211.
139. Rachel Leingang, ‘Washington and Georgia protest votes raise pressure on Biden over Gaza war’, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2024; ‘Commitment Phobia’, *Economist*, 29 February 2024.

speech.<sup>140</sup> Colonial wars interfere in the domestic politics of great powers and threaten their independence as liberal democratic entities.

The threat to liberal democracy also stems from the unintended consequences of the orientalist discourse that colonial wars employ. The discourse that frames the conflict in the Middle East in terms of Western civilisation versus Islamic terrorism furnishes the vocabulary for the extremists who employ it in justification of intercommunal violence *within* liberal democracies. Huntington's 'clash thesis', long employed by extremists, is today heard in the corridors of power. In 2017, for instance, Trump retweeted 'anti-Muslim propaganda videos shared online by a high-ranking official in the ultra-nationalist UK political group Britain First'.<sup>141</sup> Colonial wars are not bound by inter-state borders; even as they do not threaten the balance of power, their echoes travel to destabilise liberal democratic societies. Proponents of offshore balancing may not pay attention to colonial wars because they have no bearing on the global balance of power. These wars, however, inter-penetrate liberal democratic societies and destabilise them from within.

## Conclusion: Towards a Postcolonial Strategy

Mearsheimer's colleague Paul Poast argues that one may disagree with the neo-realist policy prescription but acknowledge the utility of the theory.<sup>142</sup> A contrapuntal reading of Palestine and Ukraine, by contrast, shows that the flaw in the strategy stems from the baggage imported from the theory: the assumption that states are alike under anarchy and that capabilities should be prioritised. This, in turn, raises a question: what alternative premises should a postcolonial strategy draw on? Based on the contrapuntal analysis offered here, this article concludes that a postcolonial strategy should draw on three premises. First, the conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine are not between states that are functionally alike but embedded in imperial hierarchy. Imperial hierarchies are legitimated and depoliticised by an orientalist discourse that declares cultures as inferior, dehumanises populations, and justifies policies of dispossession.<sup>143</sup> The second premise is that a repoliticisation of these hierarchical relations unveils longer timescales of imperial violence that are invisible to, or disregarded by, those who apply state-centric frames of war. Palestine and Ukraine show the variety of coercive forms this violence takes, until they occasionally erupt into wars. Coercion is the price the dispossessed pays for the avoidance of war. The third premise is that in the transnational context of empire, the metropole cannot shield itself morally from colonial or 'small' wars. Strategy, in other words, cannot be devoid of questions of universal morality and be based on capabilities alone. In concrete terms, this means that a postcolonial strategy cannot but be informed by humanist values; values that form the basis for solidarity with the democratic rights of Palestinians and Ukrainians.

The article advances postcolonial debates in IR in two important ways. First, it remedies the lack of attention to the strategy of offshore balancing by advancing the

140. Nadeem Badshah, 'Archbishops of Canterbury and York Warn Against New Extremism Definition', *The Guardian*, 12 March 2024.

141. Jeffrey Haynes, 'Introduction: The "Clash of Civilizations" and Relations Between the West and the Muslim World', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2019): 5.

142. Paul Poast, 'A World of Power and Fear: What Critics of Realism Get Wrong', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 June 2022, para 3.

143. Arif Dirlik, 'Is There History after Eurocentrism? Globalism, Postcolonialism, and the Disavowal of History', *Cultural Critique* 42, no. 2 (1999): 28–9.

postcolonial critique towards this strategy and its account of Palestine and Ukraine. The application of Said's contrapuntal reading to these case studies showcases the nexus between theory and strategy: assumptions held to be neutral – states as 'normal' or 'alike' – are not only politically and morally problematic in practice, but also fail to serve national security and America's survival as a liberal democracy. The promise of national security and survival, after all, is what justifies offshore balancing as an alternative to liberal hegemony. This article, by contrast, mobilises existing premises in postcolonial theory to repudiate the viability of this promise and offer an alternative account to address these conflicts. Second, postcolonial scholars do not apply their critiques systematically to Palestine and Ukraine.<sup>144</sup> As a result, the engagement between the 'Global South' and the 'Global East' remains limited in the discipline. This article contributes to a closer engagement between these two sets of scholarship by offering a common vocabulary across these empirical cases. A common vocabulary that directs the efforts of postcolonial scholars beyond internal disagreements and towards a vision of the world that is guided by humanist ideals.

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144. As cited above (see note 19).