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Foundations of compensation theory in international relations

Slobodan Janković (Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade)

slobodan@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs

Igor Pellicciari (Università degli Studi di Urbino)

igor.pellicciari@uniurb.it

ABSTRACT

Gli Autori presentano una nuova teoria che spiega aspetti delle relazioni internazionali, in particolare quelli relativi all'equilibrio di potere e alle dinamiche di guerra e pace. L'articolo affronta le questioni del significato di compensazione nelle relazioni internazionali e delle condizioni alle quali determinate iniziative possono essere interpretate come forme di compensazione. L'articolo è diviso in sei paragrafi. L'introduzione delinea i quesiti che hanno dato origine alla ricerca e suggerisce che alcune attività nel contesto internazionale possono essere considerate compensative. Il secondo paragrafo espone storici esempi di compensazione nella politica internazionale, concentrandosi in particolare sulla compensazione territoriale come forma più importante. . . .

The Authors present a new theory that explains aspects of international relations, particularly those related to power balancing and the dynamics of war and peace. The article addresses the questions of what compensation means in international relations, and under which conditions certain actions can be interpreted as forms of compensation. The article is divided into six parts. The introduction outlines the research questions and suggests that certain activities in the international arena can be viewed as compensatory. The second part describes historical examples of compensation in international politics, focusing especially on territorial compensation as the most prominent form. . . .

SLOBODAN JANKOVIĆ,
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Gli Autori presentano una nuova teoria che spiega aspetti delle relazioni internazionali, in particolare quelli relativi all'equilibrio di potere e alle dinamiche di guerra e pace. L'articolo affronta le questioni del significato di compensazione nelle relazioni internazionali e delle condizioni alle quali determinate iniziative possono essere interpretate come forme di compensazione. L'articolo è diviso in sei paragrafi. L'introduzione delinea i quesiti che hanno dato origine alla ricerca e suggerisce che alcune attività nel contesto internazionale possono essere considerate compensative. Il secondo paragrafo espone storici esempi di compensazione nella politica internazionale, concentrandosi in particolare sulla compensazione territoriale come forma più importante. Il terzo paragrafo prende in esame applicazioni contemporanee di compensazione, territoriale e di altri tipi. Nel quarto paragrafo, gli Autori propongono un quadro teorico per comprendere la compensazione nelle relazioni internazionali, identificando tre situazioni chiave nelle quali vi si ricorre. Il quinto paragrafo saggia la teoria attraverso esempi tratti dalle guerre civili in Libia e Siria, rivedendo le definizioni di guerra per procura e interpretando gli impegni militari diretti e "by, with, and through" di Stati Uniti, Italia, Russia ed Egitto come esempi di comportamento compensativo. L'ultimo paragrafo conclude che il quadro teorico di compensazione proposto è valido nonché applicabile per spiegare aspetti del comportamento degli attori internazionali, compresi enti sia statali sia non statali.

The Authors present a new theory that explains aspects of international relations, particularly those related to power balancing and the dynamics of war and peace. The article addresses the questions of what compensation means in international relations, and under which conditions certain actions can be interpreted as forms of compensation. The article is divided into six parts. The introduction outlines the research questions and suggests that certain activities in the international arena can be viewed as compensatory. The second part describes historical examples of compensation in international politics, focusing especially on territorial compensation as the most prominent form. The third part examines contemporary uses of territorial and other types of compensation. In the fourth part, the authors offer a theoretical framework for understanding compensation in IR, identifying three key situations in which it occurs. The fifth part tests the theory through examples from the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, revisiting definitions of proxy war and interpreting the direct and "by, with, and through" military engagements of the U.S., Italy, Russia, and Egypt as instances of compensatory behavior. The final section concludes that the proposed theoretical framework of compensation is valid and applicable for explaining aspects of the behavior of international actors, including both states and non-state entities.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Compensazione, relazioni internazionali, guerra per procura, conflitti, territorio.

KEY WORDS

Compensation, international relations, proxy wars, conflicts, territory

SLOBODAN JANKOVIĆ, IGOR PELLICCIARI*

FOUNDATIONS OF COMPENSATION THEORY IN
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS¹

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. Compensation in International Politics. 3. Compensations Today. 4. Theoretical Framework. 5. Wars and Compensations in Syria and Libya. 6. Conclusion.

1. Introduction

Some social activities are based on compensation, as are certain economic transactions. Typically, compensation involves making up for a loss, or it is offered or expected in return for a favor. The term «compensation» has several meanings, deriving from the Latin *compensatio*, meaning «balancing». Merriam-Webster defines it as «to provide something good as a balance against something bad or undesirable: to make up *for* some defect or weakness». In Latin-Italian dictionaries, *compensatio* denotes the exchange of goods (*mercium*), the balancing of a loss, or the offsetting of a legal wrongdoing or debt (*est debiti et crediti inter se distributio*). The verb *compensare*, means to counterbalance or equilibrate². Although widely employed in economics and psychology to indicate efforts to offset a loss, the notion of compensation acquires particular analytical relevance in international relations (IR), where it frames not only financial clearing but

* Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade,
Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo

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²K.E. GEORGES, F. CALONGHI, O. BADELLINO, *Dizionario latino-italiano*³, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 1999, 550.

also broader logics of strategic adjustment and systemic equilibrium among states³.

Several activities in the international arena can be considered forms of compensation.

For instance, when the Australian government decided to cancel its \$66 billion agreement with France for submarines under the 2016 Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) to build Australia's future submarine fleet⁴. France experienced a significant loss and likely sought compensation. Although the full extent of diplomatic steps remains unclear, France subsequently signed a strategic agreement with Greece. This military and defense agreement between France and Greece, signed on September 28, 2021, included the purchase of 3+1 Belhara naval frigates⁵. Rather than opting for British or American frigates, Greece chose French vessels, as it had done previously with French Rafale fighter jets. Within the framework of the broader Western alliance, France was thus partially compensated.

Before the second half of the 19th century, compensation was a regular feature of European dynastic and international politics, often involving the exchange of territories or other income sources⁶. After World War II, when the Soviet Union retained Polish territories, it had occupied in 1939⁷, Moscow compensated for Warsaw's territorial loss by awarding it the Regained Lands (*Ziemie Odzyskane*) taken from defeated Germany located west and north of the interwar Polish borders⁸.

Although the exchange of territories has seemingly ceased – at least formally – it remains possible on a bilateral or multilateral basis. Neverthe-

³*Compensazione*, Treccani, Vocabolario on line <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/compensazione/>.

⁴*Australia and France sign future submarine Inter-Governmental Agreement*, Parliament of Australia, 20.12.2016 https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/5005951/upload_binary/5005951.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%22Australia%20and%20France%20sign%20future%20submarine%20Inter-Governmental%20Agreement%22.

⁵*What does the full text of the agreement signed by Greece and France say?*, Athina984, 28.09.2021 <https://www.athina984.gr/en/2021/09/28/ti-anaferei-to-plires-keimeno-tis-symfonias-poy-tyegrapsan-ellada-kai-gallia/>.

⁶P. W. SCHROEDER, *The 19th Century International System: Changes in the Structure*, in *World Politics* 39.1 (1986) 25.

⁷That previously were part of the Russian Empire.

⁸Here, 'interwar' refers to the period between the two World Wars.

less, the notion of compensation has attracted little attention in IR scholarship. However, as this work later illustrates, territorial compensation still occurs. In IR, compensation is typically peripheral outside of economic contexts, though it is not entirely ignored. As noted, it often pertains to territorial matters or to other forms of gain and loss. It may also be associated with war, which creates a framework for various compensations. Contemporary warfare is increasingly characterized by the use of proxies, as has been the case in numerous conflicts up to the war in Ukraine⁹.

Certain proxy wars, such as those in Libya (until 2020) and Syria (since 2011), may be interpreted – at least in part – as compensatory maneuvers for different actors. If compensation helps to explain certain international dynamics, it deserves more sustained theoretical attention. The present work seeks to answer two questions:

1. What does compensation mean in IR?
2. Can compensation help understand certain international transactions?

To address these questions and propose a theoretical framework, this paper first outlines how compensation appears in IR. It then examines specific international events involving compensation and tests the proposed theoretical explanation.

2. Compensation in International Politics

Compensation has long been present in the history of international politics. Various rulers traded territories or sought to inflict, or participate in inflicting, damage and losses on rivals or enemies to offset losses on one side with gains on the other.

Historically, it is particularly evident in practices such as land swaps. For example, in the Treaty of Prenzlau¹⁰ (German for Slavic *Premyslaw*), signed on March 20, 1289, the knights of Prince of Rügen and the Brandenburg Margraves exchanged territories¹¹.

⁹A. MUMFORD, *Warfare and the Future of Conflict*, in *The RUSI Journal* 158.2 (2013) 40.

¹⁰Prenzlau is derived from the Slavic *Premyslaw*.

¹¹M. SMOLINSKI, *Remarks on the treaty of 20 March 1289 between the Brandenburg Margraves of the Johannine line and Prince Vitslav II of Rügen, and the place of this agree-*

During the Thirty Years' War, compensation was also common, such as the land exchanges between Sweden and Prussia over Pomerania and other regions¹². Prussia, seeking to annex Saxony, proposed compensating its king with territory farther west, along the Rhine.

The colonial expansion of European powers was often marked by compensations as well. After losing the Seven Years' War (1757-1763) to Britain, France sought to compensate for the loss of its Canadian colony, and thus for the weakening of its position relative to the rival British colonial empire. It did so by supporting the American revolutionaries through commercial, political, and military means¹³. This ultimately led to Britain losing important North American colonies.

Count Grigorij Nikolajevich Trubetskij, in his memoirs on the years 1914-1917, describes how Russia offered compensations to Serbia and Bulgaria to encourage Bulgaria to join the Entente. The Russians wanted Serbs to give up parts of Macedonia to Bulgaria, with the promise of compensating Serbia with lands inhabited by Serbs within the Austro-Hungarian Empire¹⁴.

Today, this practice of territorial exchange seems like a relic of past conflict resolutions, where compensations were a regular part of peace arrangements.

As Weed notes, «for a modern nation to swap land, much less annex an independent state in order to provide compensation to two other states in

ment in the plans to seize Gdańsk Pomerania after the death of Mestwin II, in *Studia Maritima* 33 (2020) 53-54.

¹²J.B. WEED, *Hohenzollern Prussia: Claiming a Legacy of Legitimacy*, University Honors Theses, Portland State University, Paper 177 (2015) 25-26, <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1211&context=honorsthesis>.

¹³French military expedition was headed by noble, count of Rochambeau, and Treaty on tobacco was important for crushing British monopoly. See more on commercial aspect in: M. VIGIÉ, *Les traités franco-américains de 1778 ou la diplomatie du tabac*, in *Inflexions* 2.41 (2019) 27-34. The most famous French officer in Patriotic army was Gilbert du Motier, marquis de La Fayette. See more in L. VEYSSIERE, *La France dans La Guerre d'indépendance Américaine*, in *La France aux Amériques des patrimoines partagés en ligne*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 5.2021, <https://heritage.bnf.fr/france-ameriques/france-dans-guerre-dindependance-americaaine>.

¹⁴G.N. TRUBECKIJ, *Rat na Balkanu, 1914-1917, i ruska diplomatija* (= *War in the Balkans 1914-1917 and Russian diplomacy*), Prosveta, Beograd 1994, 73.

a peace treaty, is unlikely»¹⁵. However, compensations still play a role in modern conflict resolutions. Of course, the issue of territorial changes may sometimes be misleading in understanding what constitutes compensation, as the exchange of territories is usually what compensation in international politics is associated with. It is therefore important to distinguish genuine compensations from minor territorial or border adjustments.

Border adjustments are more common today, often to resolve disputes rather than provide compensation. Examples include the resolution of the border dispute over Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island on the Amur River between Russia and China¹⁶ and the transfer of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon in 2008. These instances did not entail significant gains or losses, nor were they driven by compensatory motives.

Although territories are most commonly associated with compensation, they are not the only object of it. Writing on Indochina in 1963, Wolf noted that «even though attempts can be made to take measures that will compensate for the apparent military and economic consequences of a particular country's loss, it is more difficult to find ways to compensate for the effect of even a dimly perceived notion of trend on the loyalties and confidence of other people and countries»¹⁷. He explained that if Laos had fallen to communists, South Vietnamese confidence in the United States might have weakened, prompting measures to compensate for this loss¹⁸. He similarly deduced that a communist invasion of South Korea would have affected Japan's confidence in the U.S. This highlights how compensation operates as a mechanism, especially during wars or when coups or other internal events shift foreign alliances. For example, the 1978-1979 Iranian Revolution led to the U.S. compensating for the loss of Iran as an ally by strengthening its relations with Egypt¹⁹. In this sense, the U.S. offset

¹⁵WEED, *Hohenzollern Prussia* cit., 25.

¹⁶N. MAXWELL, *How the Sino-Russian Boundary Conflict Was Finally Settled: From Nerchinsk 1689 to Vladivostok 2005 via Zhenbao Island 1969*, in *Critical Asian Studies* 39.2 (2007) 229-253.

¹⁷C. WOLF JR., *Some Aspects of the 'Value' of Less-Developed Countries to the United States*, in *World Politics* 15.4 (1963) 634.

¹⁸Eventually both fell to communist forces.

¹⁹Sparked by the peace negotiations among Israel and Egypt mediated by Carter administration since 1977. Israelis offered Sinai-land for peace.

the loss of one important Middle East partner by reinforcing ties with another.

Today, it could be argued that a loss of confidence or assurance provided by a country or other actor in IR may be compensated through certain actions. For instance, Russia did not prevent Western powers (the U.S., France, and Britain, later joined by NATO) from attacking Gaddafi's Libya in 2011. This may have shaken regional confidence in Russia as a credible partner, prompting Moscow to take actions to restore this confidence. This raises the question: do territorial and other forms of compensation still exist between actors in international politics today?

3. Compensations Today

Yes, compensations remain relevant today, not only in the recent history of the Cold War but also in the more recent period. When Zagare and Kilgour tested the impact of alignment patterns, they considered three types of actors: Defender, Protégé, and Challenger. They found that an over-reliance by the Protégé on the Defender often necessitates additional compensation²⁰. This concept can be seen in the examples of the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and the Arab-Israeli conflict. During peace negotiations to end the Bosnian civil war (1992-1995), compensation was a crucial factor in redrawing internal borders. The Serbs controlled more than half of the territory, while Croats, the smallest of the three main ethnic communities (the largest being Bosnian Muslims or Bosniaks, followed by Serbs), were supported by the army of the Republic of Croatia. For Bosnia's unity to be accepted – which was primarily a Bosniak goal – the Serbs and Croats had to agree. Through external pressure from the United States and NATO, both sides received forms of compensation. Serbs lost control of some territories and relinquished their goal of uniting with Serbia and Montenegro, but they were compensated with constitutional recognition and various guarantees of the Republika Srpska. Croats accepted Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as a state in return for representation in the rotating presidency, seats in the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina,

²⁰F.C. ZAGARE, D.M. KILGOUR, *Alignment Patterns, Crisis Bargaining, and Extended Deterrence: A Game-Theoretic Analysis*, in *International Studies Quarterly* 47.4 (2003) 604.

and control over certain cantons within the Federation of BiH. The compensation process continued during the Dayton peace negotiations in 1995, when Bosniaks were compensated for the loss of Muslim-dominated enclaves Župa and Srebrenica by gaining a corridor from central Bosnia to the Bosniak enclave of Goražde²¹.

The (now *de facto* defunct) Israeli-Palestinian peace process also relies heavily on compensations. Initiated as part of the broader Arab-Israeli peace process, it began in the context of the a) First Gulf War and the increased U.S. military presence in the Arab world, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait²², and in the b) process of negotiating the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, coupled with efforts to isolate Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus from U.S.-friendly Arab and Muslim countries²³.

The negotiations included territorial compensations between Israeli and Arab areas and financial compensations for Arab Palestinian refugees²⁴. Reports from the Italian Senate on Israeli-Palestinian relations have referenced these types of compensations²⁵. For instance, during Camp David II (2000), the U.S. proposed compensation tools for Arab refugees as well as for non-identified «Israelis from Arab countries»²⁶. When the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University organized a workshop to develop proposals for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they included a «plan for relocating and compensating those Israeli settlers residing in settlements that will not be annexed by the State of Israel». They further proposed that «the land annexed by Israel should be compensated by a land swap of 1-3%», along with territorial arrangements to provide «permanent safe passage». Additionally, the workshop

²¹For the institutional arrangement of Bosnia and Herzegovina see: OSCE, *The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/0/126173.pdf>.

²²Before they were operating the former British military base in Bahrain.

²³S. JANKOVIC, *Bliskoistočna kriza: Rat bez mira*, Catena Mundi, Belgrade 2020, 84-87.

²⁴See for example in: J.R. HAMMOND, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: A collection of Essays*, Worldview Publications 2016, 84.

²⁵O. BALDACCI, A. PICASSO, A. SIMONI, *Il processo di pace in Medio Oriente dopo la conferenza di Annapolis*, Senato della Repubblica, Contributi di Istituti di ricerca specializzati 86 (2008) 14.

²⁶C. MIGDALOVITZ, *Israeli-Arab Negotiations: Background, Conflicts, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service Report 29.1.2010, 9-22.

formulated several proposals for land exchanges between Israel and the Occupied Territories²⁷.

Overall, the peace process was promoted as a grand compensation deal under the “*land for peace*” formula. Effectively, the Middle East peace process aimed at resolving the broader Arab-Israeli conflict (initiated in 1948) functioned as a form of compensation.

As Rashid Khalidi commented, «the ‘peace process’ has consisted of indulging Israeli intransigence over Palestine in exchange for foreign-policy goals unrelated to the advancement of peace and Palestinian freedom. In the late 1970s this involved the strategic cold war prize of moving Egypt from the Soviet column to the American column»²⁸. The underlying compensations were twofold: (1) U.S. support for the peace process to reduce anti-American sentiments in the Muslim world, and (2) to gain Arab support against Iran and other opponents of U.S. and Israeli regional policies²⁹.

Three types of compensations emerged in the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian peace processes:

A) Territorial Swaps: land exchanges between Israelis and the Palestinian Authority.

B) Financial Compensations: payments for territory and refugees, and the establishment of Qualified Industrial Zones in Egypt and Jordan as economic bases for peaceful relations with Israel³⁰.

²⁷J.A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY, *Getting to the Territorial Endgame of an Israeli-Palestinian Peace Settlement. A Special Report by the Israeli-Palestinian Workshop of the Baker Institute's Conflict Resolution Forum*, Houston 2010, 5, 9, 17, 55, <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/1-2010-Getting-to-the-Territorial-Endgame-of-an-Israeli-Palestinian-Peace-Settlement-Baker-Institute-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf>.

²⁸R. KHALIDI, *Is Any Hope Left for Mideast Peace?*, The New York Times, 13.03.2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/13/opinion/obama-in-jerusalem.html?src=me&ref=general>.

²⁹Effectively U.S. presented their peacemaking efforts to Israel lobby as policy aimed at isolating Israeli enemies. Later it used the process to be recognized as major or after the only mediator involved having in mind global policies of Washington. See more in JANKOVIĆ, *Bliskoistočna kriza* cit.

³⁰S. JANKOVIĆ, *Israel: Middle East objectives of the regional power after the Lebanon war* (2006), in ID., *Convergence and confrontation: The Balkans and the Middle East in the 21st century*, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade 2021, 76.

C) Political Favors: land-for-peace agreements between Egypt and Israel, without references to the status of Palestine, allowed both countries to claim that they did not renounce policies in that regard, thereby compensating for pressure from hardliners. U.S. involvement as a mediator improved its image by participating in the process. It was one of the responses to the regional negative image created after stationing troops in the Arabian Peninsula during the First Gulf War. Israeli acceptance to participate in the process was compensated by U.S. support for the Jewish state against Iran, Syria, Iraq and their proxies.

Groups such as the Houthis, Islamic resistance in Iraq, and Hezbollah often act as proxies for a principal agent³¹. Understanding compensation as a motivation for proxy use highlights its importance in wider IR. In an effort to balance a stronger competitor or rival in the international arena, a weaker party may seek to compensate for its status through alliances or asymmetric measures, in politics as in warfare³².

Amid shifting global power dynamics, spurred by a coalition of challengers and U.S. overextension, the Middle East peace process evolved into a more explicit form of compensation. The Abraham Accords exemplify this shift, as security and economic deals were exchanged for the recognition of Israel by Arab countries. Acting as mediator, the U.S. guaranteed continued cooperation, while Israel provided technological partnerships as compensation for the diplomatic softening of previously hostile Arab positions.

Beyond these examples, recent Russian politics can be seen partly as a shift to compensate for its previous European-oriented focus by pivoting toward a Eurasian strategy. This strategic reorientation aims to support a multipolar world order. It reflects the cumulative effects of prior cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Russia's increased engagement in Middle Eastern politics, efforts to promote the ruble in international trade, a recent defense alliance with Azerbaijan

³¹D.M. ZORRI, H.A. SADRI, D.C. ELLIS, *Iranian Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis*, in JSOU Report 20-5, The Joint Special Operations University Press, MacDill 2020, 27-92.

³²For tendency to balance the power of other state in international arena, see for example: K. WALZ, *Theory of International Politics*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1979, 132.

(February 22, 2022), and strengthened cooperation with China, Iran, Pakistan, and India:

For some it is little more than compensation for Moscow's failures in the West, taking up the idea of an earlier proclaimed "Pivot to Asia," while for others it represents a fundamental and long-delayed assertion of a new political geography that would give substance to the idea of a multipolar world³³.

Lukin and Novikov interpret this shift somewhat differently, attributing it to the «inability of the United States and its allies to find a way for proper integration of Russia and China into regional security and political orders on the flanks of Eurasia», along with an underestimation of both countries by the U.S. This miscalculation, coupled with an ideologically driven foreign policy, encouraged a Russian-Chinese partnership aimed at shaping a multipolar world³⁴.

Krickovic and Pellicciari argue that Russia and China cooperate to compensate for their economic and military weaknesses relative to the collective West. However, this claim is somewhat relative, as it remains unclear who is truly militarily weaker or how economically strong the West actually is³⁵.

In this context, compensation serves to explain partnerships among multiple actors as a way to advance political and economic goals, with military strength providing a deterrent effect that allows actors to negotiate from a stronger position. Specifically, the cooperation between Russia and China creates a cumulative effect that helps compensate for their individual limitations compared to their strategic rival, the West (or the Euro-Atlantic community). Similarly, Trenin uses the term "compensation"

³³A. KRICKOVIC, R. SAKWA, *Introduction: From greater Europe to greater Eurasia*, in *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 12.1 (2021) 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366521999907>.

³⁴A. LUKIN, D. NOVIKOV, *Sino-Russian rapprochement and Greater Eurasia: From geopolitical pole to international society?*, in *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 12.1 (2021) 32, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/18793665211000057>.

³⁵A. KRICKOVIC, I. PELLICCIARI, *From "Greater Europe" to "Greater Eurasia": Status concerns and the evolution of Russia's approach to alignment and regional integration*, in *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 12.1 (2021) 94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366521998808>.

(компенсация in Russian) to describe how Russia might act to balance its «weakness vis-à-vis its adversaries» – the U.S. and its allies³⁶.

These examples provide substantial material for defining the role of compensation in IR.

4. Theoretical Framework

How can we define compensation in IR? So far, various examples have shown how compensation operates in IR.

Compensation can be classified as follows:

1) Territorial Compensation. This occurs in two cases:

a) Territorial Swaps: here, two or more countries or entities exchange land within an official or *de facto* international framework, as seen in the Bosnian peace agreement, the Egypt-Israel peace accords, past Israeli-Palestinian agreements, and even in historical conflicts like the Thirty Years' War³⁷.

b) Loss of Territory or Diminished Relative Territorial Reach: this situation arises when one state's territorial influence declines compared to others. For instance, after Germany unified in 1871, it controlled more European territory, but France and Great Britain had much larger colonial holdings. Germany's colonial ambitions were partly driven by the need to compensate for this disparity. Its limited colonial acquisitions in Africa and Oceania³⁸ led Germany to seek further expansion in Europe, birthing the concept of *Lebensraum* (vital space) in Eastern Europe.

2) Compensation for Weakness or Loss of Political Influence: this applies to power dynamics between major and minor powers, as well as within alliances.

³⁶D. TRENIN, *A Five-Year Outlook for Russian Foreign Policy: Demands, Drivers, and Influences* (Внешняя политика России в ближайшие пять лет: цели, стимулы, ориентиры), Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, 18.03.2016, English version: <https://carnegie-moscow.org/2016/03/18/five-year-outlook-for-russian-foreign-policy-demands-drivers-and-influences-pub-63075>; Russian version: <https://carnegie.ru/2016/04/28/ru-pub-63462>.

³⁷In the case of eventual Israeli-Palestinian agreement, or in the case of the Dayton Peace agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina, guarantors, or witnesses are third state parties. Eventually international organizations can be involved in the agreement of the kind.

³⁸Samoa and part of Papua in Oceania and Namibia and Tangaika in Africa.

On one hand, compensation may involve the relationship between a major power and a smaller state, or between allies. Lacking the military strength to directly counter Israel and the U.S., Iran employs asymmetrical warfare – using ballistic missiles and proxies – to offset its weaknesses³⁹.

In terms of partnerships, an example can be seen with Laos and South Vietnam, which aligned with the U.S. in the 1970s. When the leading member of an alliance (in this case, the U.S.) loses a partner (such as Laos), it may undermine the confidence of remaining allies (like South Vietnam and the Republic of Korea). These partners may begin to perceive that their protector or leading ally cannot fully guarantee their security. When this happens, the affected actors may seek compensation to regain lost influence or restore confidence. To address this loss, the leading partner might resort to military measures, such as direct intervention or increased military engagement, as the U.S. did with the bombing campaigns in Laos.

3) Compensation of Weakness through Cooperation and Asymmetric Measures: this type of compensation addresses relative weaknesses in the military or economic sphere, often with a clear international dimension. An example is the partnership between China and Russia, and more broadly, the cooperation within BRICS, which was initially aimed at compensating individual weaknesses relative to the U.S. or the West in general. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Defense has sought to offset Russian and Chinese military advancements by accelerating technological development⁴⁰.

When one actor is militarily dominant, others may respond with asymmetric measures, such as guerrilla tactics, terrorism, or forming alliances. An example is Iran's support for Hezbollah as a counter to U.S. and Israeli military power during and after the civil war in Lebanon. Non-military asymmetrical responses, like the Palestinian BDS campaign against Israel, also serve compensatory purposes.

These examples illustrate common compensation mechanisms employed by international actors, always in reference to power relations. Compensation is used in two main directions:

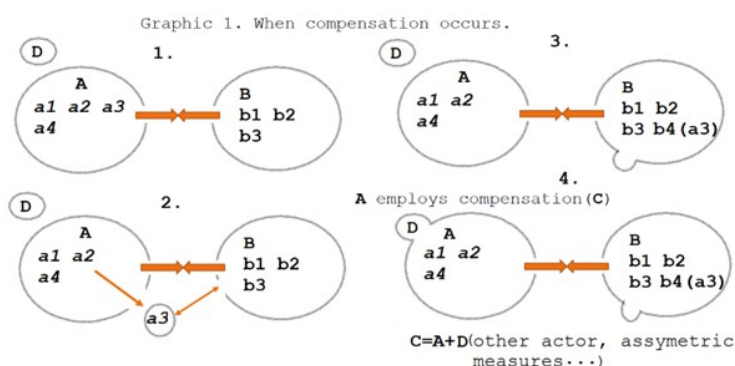
³⁹A. TABATABAI, *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy*, Oxford University Press & Hurst Publishers, New York 2020, 253, 255, 295.

⁴⁰G. GENTILE, M. SHURKIN, A. T. EVANS, M. GRISÉ, M. HVIKZA, R. JENSEN, *A History of the Third Offset, 2014-2018*, Santa Monica 2021, III, X, 14, 23, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA454-1.html.

a) To balance a loss in relative power (territorial, economic, or within spheres of influence), or

b) To enhance power relative to others (e.g., China and Russia against the U.S. and EU, or Iran and Hezbollah against the U.S. and Israel).

In the case of political influence, this concept can be illustrated as in Graphic 1. Here, Actor A is a dominant partner or leader within a group of actors (a1, a2, a3, ...), while B is dominant among rivals or leads a rival group of actors (b1, b2, b3, ...). If a member of A's group, such as a3, leaves due to reasons like a coup d'état, elections, or internal conflict, A's power is proportionally reduced compared to B's group. In response, A may resort to compensation to restore its previous strength and balance against B. If a3 joins the rival group, A's position is weakened even further relative to B. At this point, A seeks compensation, represented by C, by attempting to attract a third actor, D, who was previously unaligned with either A or B. D may also represent an asymmetric measure –military, economic, or media-based. A might also seek to regain influence over a3 or encourage members of the rival group (b1, b2, b3) to leave B and potentially join A. The introduction of C illustrates A's attempt to balance or even regain power.



author: S. Jankovic and I. Pellicciari

Hence, compensation is a mechanism employed by international actors (both states and non-states), individually or in groups, to balance or enhance their relative power compared to other actors. It is triggered in three situations: a) when there is a loss of territory or a reduction in relative territorial reach compared to other actors, b) when an actor or the leading partner in a group experiences a loss of political influence, and c) when

two or more actors seek to compensate for individual weaknesses through cooperation and asymmetric measures in the military or economic spheres.

This mechanism can help explain certain processes in IR, particularly in the fields of war and peace.

5. Wars and Compensations in Syria and Libya

To explore this, we will test whether compensation can explain the behavior of certain actors in the recent Syrian and Libyan conflicts.

The wars in Libya and Syria are both civil and international in nature. Participants include both local and foreign actors, encompassing not only regional state and non-state actors but also those from other continents. African, European, Asian, and, to some extent, American actors were active in the Second Libyan War (2014-2021; the first was in 2011)⁴¹. In the Syrian war (2011-present), European, Asian, American, and even African⁴² actors have been involved. Both of these international and partly civil wars also qualify as proxy wars.

Proxy wars have been studied for decades in strategic and security studies as well as in geopolitical analysis. However, the reasons for waging proxy wars have often been sidelined in favor of actor descriptions. Most analyses offer technical explanations, such as the idea that nuclear powers avoid direct wars to prevent mutual destruction, hence turning to proxy actors. Proxy wars are also seen as more economical, with reduced legal responsibility (as force is used outside a constitutional framework) and fewer body counts for regular armies. Some analysts argue that international political and technological developments have altered proxy wars, as

⁴¹M.M. MUITA (ed.), *Libya conflict insight*, in Conflict analysis and insight 1 (2018), Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University, <https://ipss-addis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Libya-Conflict-Insight.pdf>.

⁴²Libyan jihadists previously fighting alongside NATO joined Al Baghdadi in Syria to lead the Al Qaeda in that country that was later transformed in ISIS (Daesh). See: F. WEHREY, A. ALRABABA'H, *Rising Out of Chaos: The Islamic State in Libya*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 5.03.2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2015/03/rising-out-of-chaos-the-islamic-state-in-libya?lang=en>. Taken from: JANKOVIC, *Bliskoistočna kriza* cit., 310. See on this also document at <http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Pg.-291-Pgs.-287-293-JW-v-DOD-and-State-14-812-DOD-Release-2015-04-10-final-version11.pdf>.

multipolarity intensifies competition among great and regional powers, introducing new actors who act as principals engaging proxies or agents. Concurrently, the advancement of technology and weaponry is seen as a game-changer:

Great power competition is on the rise, and rivalries among regional powers in the Greater Middle East and its periphery are intensifying. In this new era of proxy warfare, the diffusion of technology, information, and weapons has loosened the state's monopoly on the use of force [...] changes wrought by strategic innovations in proxy force deployment and the use of weapons, communications, and information – all of which have transformed the nature of strategic surprise, made proxy forces more numerous, and in some case made proxies more lethal⁴³.

Still, these changes did not introduce anything fundamentally new. Even earlier, relationships between principals and proxies were often somewhat loose, as seen in the case of the U.S. and the Laotian regime. The location of a proxy war and the types of armaments used are secondary to defining what proxy wars are and understanding their underlying rationale. Yet, the question of “where” is often connected to the question of “why.” Of course, there isn't a single explanation. One of the reasons is compensation, which can motivate the decision to wage war – and, more broadly, to engage in proxy warfare.

Wars involving various countries and non-state actors in the territory of a third state may be considered proxy wars if they are waged by or with the assistance of intermediary actors. Similarly, Konyukhovskiy and Grigoriadis define a proxy war as «a war that is carried out by someone else (through representatives) or a mediated war»⁴⁴. Therefore, we may also observe direct engagement by an actor related to a proxy, or the proxy may provide all «boots on the ground». U.S. Army Major Amos C. Fox describes proxy warfare as «the physical manifestation of a dominant actor,

⁴³C. RONDEAUX, D. STERMAN, *Twenty First Century Proxy Warfare*, in *New America* (2.2019) 7, <https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/twenty-first-century-proxy-warfare-confronting-strategic-innovation-multipolar-world/>.

⁴⁴P.V. KONYUKHOVSKIY, T. GRIGORIADIS, *Proxy wars. Discussion Papers* 2018/4, Free University, School of Business & Economics, Berlin 2018, 2, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/175882/1/1016108230.pdf>.

or the principal, operating by, with, and through a non-dominant actor (the agent, or proxy) against an adversary to achieve the dominant actor's military objectives [...]»⁴⁵. Fox identifies five models of proxy warfare and argues that this form of conflict is now dominant, though his analysis of its causes remains largely technical and logistical⁴⁶. How and why might compensation influence a decision to engage in direct or proxy war?

The Libyan case

The Libyan wars illustrate compensations through both direct involvement and the use of proxies. Italy's participation in the 2011 NATO war against Gaddafi's Libya serves as an example of compensation without direct use of a proxy, at least in bilateral terms. Although Italy, as part of NATO, did employ Islamic and other fighters against the Libyan army and Gaddafi's mercenaries, this was within the North Atlantic Alliance framework. Egypt, Russia, NATO, the Emirates, and Turkey, on the other hand, engaged in looser or tighter proxy arrangements.

Italy was Libya's strongest economic partner under Gaddafi. When France, the UK, and the U.S. launched operations against Libya on March 17, 2011, later joined by NATO, Italy faced economic repercussions (and later dealt with the migrant crisis). David Lake might argue that, as a weaker partner, Italy merely bandwagoned within the Western hierarchical order. While this partly explains why Italy did not oppose the NATO intervention, compensation explains Italy's choice to participate. As a junior partner, Italy could not withstand the decision of more powerful allies but joined to compensate for its lost influence and potential economic benefits⁴⁷.

⁴⁵A. FOX, *Conflict and the Need for a Theory of Proxy Warfare*, in *Journal of Strategic Security* 12.1 (2019) 44-71, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.12.1.1701>; <https://scholar-commons.usf.edu/jss/vol12/iss1/3>.

⁴⁶A. FOX, *Exploitative, Transactional, Coercive, Cultural, and Contractual: Toward a Better Theory of Proxy War*, Modern War Institute at West Point, 06.11.20, <https://mwi.usma.edu/exploitative-transactional-coercive-cultural-contractual-toward-bet-ter-theory-proxy-war/>.

⁴⁷On hierarchical orders in IR see: D.A. LAKE, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2009.

Italy's longstanding policy has been to serve as Libya's principal partner⁴⁸. Participation in NATO operations was largely driven by the need to partially compensate for a) lost political influence threatened by unilateral Anglo-French actions that endangered Italian interests, and b) economic losses that could be offset in post-war reconstruction.

Economically – and to a lesser extent, politically – Italy's participation in the potentially lucrative business of an oil-rich country was arguably secured by its choice to accept, support, and join the intervention⁴⁹.

Indeed, Italy managed to retain part of the business for its energy company, Eni, which produces 24 million barrels of oil per year, plus gas⁵⁰.

As the most populous Arab country and a leading regional power in Africa, particularly interested in its neighbors Libya and Sudan (and involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict until 1977), Egypt has traditionally held an interest in influencing Libya's foreign and internal political processes⁵¹.

Egypt's domestic and regional policies have remained strongly anti-Islamist, aligning it with an informal alliance that includes the Emirates and Saudi Arabia⁵². Following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 and the consolidation of a new regime under President Abdel Fattah

⁴⁸See more in: S. JANKOVIC, *Italian Policy in South and East Mediterranean*, in National Interest, Year XVI, 39.3 (2020) 159-186, <https://doi.org/10.22182/ni.3932020.7>.

⁴⁹For more on Italian, French and partially British reasons to intervene in Libya in 2011 see also: L. PALMA, *La caduta di Gheddafi e la frantumazione della Libia*, ISPI 28.06.2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-caduta-di-gheddafi-e-la-frantu-mazione-della-libia-30903>.

⁵⁰Eni website, *Le nostre attività in Libia*, <https://www.eni.com/it-IT/eni-nel-mondo/africa/libia.html>.

⁵¹For the strategic nature of relations with Sudan, because of the common border, and due to the control of the flow of Nile River and position of Egypt as a link between East Africa and Mediterranean see C. LEBAS, S. BILIMORIA, *L'Egypte et son environnement géopolitique*, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche de l'Ecole Militaire, 11.2007, 5 and 17-18, <https://www.irsem.fr/data/files/irsem/documents/document/file/820/L'Egypte%20et%20son%20environnement%20gé%3Bopolitique.pdf>; and H. DARWISHEH, *Egyptian-Sudanese Relations amidst changing Geopolitics*, in Middle East Review 7 (2020) 65-79, https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/mercv/7/0/7_Vol.7_E-Art02/_article/-char/en.

⁵²H. HALAWA, *Burning ambition: Egypt's return to regional leadership and how Europe should respond*, in ECFR Policy Brief, 11.10.2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/burning-ambition-egypts-return-to-regional-leadership-and-how-europe-should-re-spond/>.

el-Sisi, the Egyptian government joined military operations in the Second Libyan War (2014-2021), supporting and assisting Khalifa Haftar in a loosely defined principal-agent relationship⁵³.

On several occasions, Egypt issued warnings of overt military intervention⁵⁴. Turkey combined direct intervention with support from the private military company (PMC) SADAT in backing its proxy partner in Libya. Militias loyal to the Tripoli government partnered not only with Turkey but also with Qatar, while the Emirates supported the opposing side against Erdogan. Russia also engaged through the private military company Wagner, training LNA forces loyal to Haftar and the Tobruk-based government and participating in direct military operations⁵⁵.

In fact, «France, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Egypt, especially after the Morsi era, aligned with the Emirates, while Turkey and Sudan worked in line with Qatar»⁵⁶. While Turkey supported, armed, and trained forces loyal to the Tripoli government in opposition to the Libyan National Army led by Haftar, the Emirates, Egypt, and Russia supported the opposing side.

The Egyptian case here represents the compensation for the loss of relative political influence by an actor or a leading partner. Egypt was a leading partner to Sudan and had vested interests and influence in both Sudan and Libya. The Arab Spring brought instability; South Sudan seceded, and Libya fell into the control of various militias, mostly Islamist. Cairo needed to compensate for two things: a) its lost influence in the region and b) the proportional growth of Islamist forces, which Cairo had sought to repress for decades, except for a brief period from 2011 to 2013. Consequently, Egypt decided to support Haftar to restore some influence in

⁵³Égypte-Libye: Haftar redevient l'allié privilégié du Caire, Radio France International, 13.08.2021.

⁵⁴L'Égypte menace d'une "intervention directe" en Libye si le GNA progresse, France 24, 21.6.2021.

⁵⁵C. RONDEAUX, *Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare*, in *New America* (11.2019) 15, https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Decoding_the_Wagner_Group.pdf.

⁵⁶C.A. KOZERA, P. BERNAT, C. GÜRER, B. POPLAWSKI, M.A. SÖZER, *Game of Proxies. Towards a new model of warfare: Experiences from the CAR, Libya, Mali, Syria, and Ukraine*, in *Security and Defence Quarterly* 31.4 (2020) 89, <https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/131787>.

Libya, demonstrating its renewed foreign policy importance and reducing the territory controlled by Islamist groups.

The Syrian case

Among the various participants in the Syrian war since 2011, some – such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the U.S. – have been directly involved, while others, including the U.S., Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Qatar, have acted through proxies. As with the Libyan wars, some military interventions in Syria can be explained by compensation, though not all.

Is American intervention through proxy forces in Syria a form of compensation? In a sense, yes. After the challenges of deploying large armies in Iraq⁵⁷ and Afghanistan⁵⁸, the U.S. adopted an official proxy strategy known as ‘by, with, and through’. Even in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. relied heavily on partners. In Syria, Washington’s most prominent proxy partners are the Kurds, along with Islamist militias stationed around the Al Tanf base in the south of the country⁵⁹. The U.S. sought to address domestic pressure against troop casualties, the impracticality of a new intervention in a context where Russia had first diplomatically and then militarily intervened, and the need to reduce war costs by relying on the YPG. This strategy achieved tactical success in defeating Daesh (the so-called Islamic State).

Following the extensive American expansion in the broader Middle East, which culminated in NATO’s military intervention against Libya in 2011, Russia’s credibility in the region was shaken. Syria remained the only Arab country with a Russian military presence in the Mediterranean. If the Assad regime had fallen in the civil and international war due to pressure from various Western and Arab countries, Russia would have lost its foothold in a broader area of the Middle East and North Africa. The

⁵⁷D. BYMAN, *An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or Bridge Too Far?*, in *Security Studies* 17.4 (2008) 599-643, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/10_iraq_byman.pdf.

⁵⁸G. HERD, *The Causes and the Consequences of Strategic Failure in Afghanistan?*, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies 068 (8.2021), <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/causes-and-consequences-strategic-failure-afghanistan-0>.

⁵⁹C. RONDEAUX, D. STERMAN, *Twenty First Century Proxy Warfare* cit., 22.

Primakov-announced return to the region would have utterly failed⁶⁰. Thus, the proportional increase in U.S. and Western influence, along with Turkey's support for various anti-Assad rebels and paramilitary groups, was counterbalanced by Russia's direct military intervention in the Syrian war and its support of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) loyal to Bashar al-Assad. The SAA thus became a sort of proxy for Russia. Later, the deployment of the Wagner company in Libya was an asymmetric but successful move to compensate for Moscow's decades-long retreat from Africa. Wagner also served as a tool for expanding Russia's influence in the Central African Republic, Mali, and other sub-Saharan countries, functioning both as an instrument of strategic projection and as a means of compensating for Russia's previous marginalization on the continent⁶¹. Russia's decision to engage militarily – directly and through proxies in Syria, and through proxies in Libya – was driven by the need to compensate for: 1) the loss of relative political influence and 2) previous weaknesses on the African continent, addressed through cooperation with local partners in Libya (Haftar's LNA) and the use of private PMCs as an asymmetric measure.

6. Conclusion

Compensations have long been part of the history of IR. They have been, and continue to be, valuable tools employed by state and non-state actors in the international arena in a variety of circumstances. Even the oldest and most traditional form – territorial compensation – is still in use and may see a resurgence in today's shifting global order. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the resolution of the Bosnian civil war are prominent examples. Yet, despite its frequent application, compensation as a concept has not been fully theorized.

⁶⁰See more on Russian politics in the Middle East and on its intervention in Syria in S. JANKOVIĆ, *Middle East Crisis: War without Peace*, cit.

⁶¹U.S. Senate, *Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander, United States Africa Command before the Senate Armed Forces Committee*, 15.3.2022, 3-4, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM%20FY23%20Posture%20Statement%20ISO%20SASC%2015%20MAR%20Hearing%20_%20Cleared%2011%20MAR%2022.pdf.

As a mechanism tied to the balance of power or perceived threats⁶², compensation can be integrated into the Realist school of IR, supporting realist assumptions about behavior in an anarchic international order. At the same time, it can be understood from a constructivist perspective, insofar as actors respond to perceptions by compensating for the rising power of other actors. Its applicability to colonial and neo-colonial dynamics also makes it relevant within postcolonial studies. In this sense, compensation transcends traditional theoretical divisions in IR.

Drawing on historical cases – from the Thirty Years' War, to U.S. – led partnerships in Indochina during the Cold War, to the formation of BRICS, recent conflicts in Syria and Libya, and Iran's use of proxies and asymmetric warfare to counter its adversaries' technological superiority – this article defines compensation and identifies three main contexts in which it occurs:

- a) when there is a loss of territory or a diminished territorial reach relative to other actors;
- b) when an actor, or the leading member of a group, loses relative political influence;
- c) when two or more actors seek to compensate for individual weaknesses through cooperation and asymmetric measures in the military or economic domain.

These distinct scenarios motivate actors to adopt compensation as a strategic mechanism.

We argue that compensation is always connected to the core subject of IR: power relations. It helps explain specific behaviors of actors in both war and peace. In terms of power, compensation is used either:

- a) to balance a loss of relative power (whether territorial, economic, or geopolitical), or
- b) to enhance power vis-à-vis others.

This theoretical framework is tested through two empirical cases: the wars in Libya and Syria. Of course, more actors than those analyzed have participated, and continue to participate, in these conflicts – yet not all act

⁶²See for example seminal works: K.N. WALTZ, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley, Reading 1979; S.M. WALT, *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power*, in *International Security* 9.4 (Spring 1985) 3-43.

with compensatory motives. Italian support for NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya, Egyptian backing of Haftar's LNA in the Second Libyan War, U.S. support for the Kurdish YPG in Syria, Russia's direct intervention in the Syrian conflict, and its deployment of the Wagner PMC in Africa, all exemplify compensatory logics consistent with the proposed theory.

When an actor loses political influence or its status within a group, it may resort to compensation. Likewise, relatively weaker actors may attempt to offset their limitations, as seen in the economic sphere with BRICS members. This suggests that compensation may be among the motivating forces behind the growing use of proxy wars – just as it has recently been noted in the context of inter-state aid policies⁶³.

Given its implications for security studies, this article offers only a first step toward a theoretical understanding of compensation in IR. It aims to prompt further and deeper exploration of this underexamined yet pervasive mechanism.

⁶³I. PELLICCIARI, *World War Aid. Interventionist Aid and War in Ukraine*, Routledge, London 2024.

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