

RUSSIA'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE POST-2022 INTERNATIONAL ORDER: A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study applies the neoclassical realist (NCR) framework to examine Russia's grand strategy following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Bridging systemic incentives and unit-level intervening variables including state-society relations, executive autonomy, strategic culture, and elite perception NCR illuminates why Russian foreign policy has been simultaneously structurally motivated and tactically dysfunctional. The paper argues that Russia pursues a five-pronged revisionist grand strategy encompassing military force, energy statecraft, informational warfare, Eurasian institutional consolidation, and nuclear signaling, filtered through a Putinist ideational lens that systematically misread both Ukrainian resilience and Western cohesion. While Russia achieved partial success in restructuring global alignments through the BRICS-plus framework and Global South neutrality, its core strategic objectives preventing NATO enlargement and subordinating Ukraine have been decisively frustrated. The paper concludes that Russia faces an accelerating capability-aspiration gap, rendering its grand strategy structurally unsustainable over the medium term without significant systemic shifts.

Keywords: Neoclassical Realism; Russia; grand strategy; Ukraine war; NATO

1. INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, an act that constitutes the most consequential rupture in the European security order since 1945. The invasion marked not merely an escalation of the Donbas conflict that had simmered since 2014 but a fundamental revision of the post-Cold War international order one underwritten by the norms of territorial sovereignty, the inviolability of borders, and the liberal institutional architecture constructed under American primacy. Scholars, policymakers, and strategic analysts have since grappled with a central question: what does Russia actually want, and does it have a coherent grand strategy to achieve it?

This paper argues that Russia does possess a recognizable, if imperfectly executed, grand strategy one that can be systematically analyzed through the lens of neoclassical realism (NCR). Developed by scholars including Gideon Rose, Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro, NCR holds that foreign policy is driven primarily by a state's relative power position in the international system, but that the translation of systemic pressures into actual strategic behaviour is mediated by a range of unit-level intervening variables: the nature of state-society relations, executive autonomy from domestic constraints, the extractive capacity of the state, and the ideational filters strategic culture and elite beliefs through which decision-makers interpret the external environment.¹

The analytical utility of NCR for understanding Russia lies precisely in its capacity to bridge structural and agential explanations. Structural realists, such as John Mearsheimer, have emphasized NATO enlargement as the systemic driver of Russian behaviour, reducing Moscow's strategic calculus to an essentially rational response to encirclement.² Constructivists, by contrast, have privileged Russian identity narratives – the *Russkiy Mir* concept, Slavic civilizational claims, and historical memory – as the primary explanatory variable.³ NCR subsumes both logics within a more comprehensive framework: systemic pressures create incentives and constraints, while unit-level variables determine how, when, and how effectively states respond to those pressures.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Neoclassical realism emerged in the 1990s as a corrective to the parsimony of structural realism. Kenneth Waltz's neorealism, while elegant in its systemic logic, was deliberately designed to be a theory of international politics rather than foreign policy; it could predict broad patterns of balancing behaviour but could not account for the considerable variation in how states with similar structural positions actually behaved.⁴ NCR restored the foreign policy ambition of classical realism – the attention to statecraft, perception, and domestic politics – while retaining the systemic primacy of relative power as the independent variable.

In the canonical NCR formulation developed by Rose and subsequently systematized by Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, the causal chain runs as follows: changes in the international distribution of power create incentives and pressures (the independent variable); these systemic signals are transmitted through a set of intervening variables at the unit level; the product is actual foreign policy behaviour (the dependent variable).⁵ The intervening variables include (1) leader images and beliefs, (2) strategic culture, (3) state-society relations and the regime's extractive capacity, and (4) the degree of executive autonomy from domestic societal pressures.

Table 1. Neoclassical Realist Variables Applied to Russia (Post-2022)

Variable	NCR Category	Application to Russia (Post-2022)
Systemic	Relative Power Distribution	Decline of unipolarity; Russian strategic calculus of closing window of opportunity before further relative decline
Systemic	Threat Environment	NATO eastward expansion perceived as existential threat; encirclement narrative as systemic pressure
Unit-level	State–Society Relations	Regime consolidation under Putin; nationalist mobilization suppressing elite dissent
Unit-level	Executive Autonomy	High centralization of foreign-policy decision-making; FSB/Siloviki dominance over liberal technocrats
Unit-level	Strategic Culture	Slavic civilizational identity; Eurasianism; <i>Russkiy Mir</i> ideology as elite-level ideational filter
Unit-level	Resource Extraction Capacity	Hydrocarbon export revenues funding military modernization despite sanctions regime
Intervening	Perception & Misperception	Putin's historicist worldview underestimating Ukrainian national identity and Western unity
Intervening	Leader Beliefs	Zero-sum security ontology; rejection of liberal international order legitimacy

Note: NCR = Neoclassical Realism; FSB = Federal Security Service. Sources: Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2009); Rynning (2011); Herd (2022).

A crucial NCR insight is that states do not automatically or efficiently convert systemic pressures into optimal strategic responses. Rather, misperception, ideological rigidity, and domestic political constraints can produce what Taliaferro calls 'suboptimal foreign policy' – strategies that deviate systematically from what a structurally rational actor would pursue.⁶ As this paper demonstrates, Russia's post-2022 strategy exhibits precisely this pattern: structurally motivated, ideologically distorted, and domestically constrained in ways that have undermined its strategic effectiveness.

3. SYSTEMIC CONTEXT: RELATIVE DECLINE AND THE CLOSING WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

To understand Russian grand strategy, one must begin with the structural reality that Moscow perceives itself to be a declining great power operating within a closing window of opportunity. From a neoclassical realist perspective, this perception whether accurate or not constitutes the primary systemic driver of Russian strategic behaviour.

The material evidence for Russian relative decline is substantial. Russia's GDP (PPP-adjusted) constitutes approximately 3 percent of global output, compared to 25 percent for the United States and 18 percent for China.⁷ Its defense spending, while dramatically increased since 2022, remains one-tenth of combined NATO expenditure. Demographic decline – a shrinking and ageing population constrains long-run manpower generation and economic dynamism. Technological dependence, made acute by post-2022 sanctions, has exposed the depth of Russian reliance on Western semiconductors, machine tools, and advanced manufacturing inputs.

Yet from Moscow's perspective, the strategic calculus was shaped not merely by current capabilities but by trajectories. Russian strategic documents notably the 2021 National Security Strategy and President Putin's July 2021 essay on Russian-Ukrainian unity reveal an elite worldview that viewed the post-2014 trajectory as one of accelerating strategic deterioration: a more capable and internally consolidated Ukraine increasingly integrated into Western institutional structures, a NATO alliance expanding eastward and deepening military cooperation with Kyiv, and a Western sanctions regime that, while manageable in the short term, would progressively constrain Russia's capacity to compete.⁸

This 'windows of opportunity' logic the perception that the costs of action would increase over time while the probability of success would decline is a well-documented driver of preventive war in the IR literature, articulated by A.F.K. Organski, Randall Schweller, and Dale Copeland.⁹ Applied to the Russian case, it suggests that the February 2022 invasion was not simply opportunistic aggression but a considered, if catastrophically miscalculated, strategic choice driven by a perceived imperative to act before the window of opportunity closed entirely.

The systemic context is further shaped by the broader transition from unipolarity toward multipolarity. Russian strategic discourse has consistently framed the post-2022 confrontation as a struggle for a new international order one that would replace American-led liberal hegemony with a 'polycentric world' in which great powers exercise recognized spheres of influence. Putin's February 2022 address, his October 2022 Valdai speech, and Russia's updated Foreign Policy Concept (March 2023) all invoke this multipolar framing as both descriptive and normative – describing what Russia sees as an emerging structural reality and articulating what it seeks to bring about.¹⁰

4. UNIT-LEVEL INTERVENING VARIABLES: TRANSLATING SYSTEMIC PRESSURE INTO STRATEGY

4.1 Executive Autonomy and the Siloviki State

Russia under Vladimir Putin represents a paradigmatic case of what NCR scholars term 'high executive autonomy' a political system in which the leadership faces minimal institutionalized constraints from domestic societal or legislative actors when formulating and executing foreign policy. The progressive elimination of independent political opposition, the subordination of the Federal Assembly to Kremlin direction, the neutralization of independent media, and the concentration of decision-making authority within a narrow circle of security service officials (Siloviki) have produced a foreign policy process that is insulated from pluralistic societal pressures but commensurately vulnerable to elite misperception and groupthink.¹¹

This concentration of authority has a dual implication for grand strategy. On the one hand, it enables rapid decision-making and sustained strategic commitment Russia has been able to prosecute a costly war of attrition without the accountability mechanisms that might force democratic adjustment. On the other hand, the elimination of institutional checks has removed corrective feedback mechanisms. The catastrophic intelligence failure surrounding the expectation of a rapid Ukrainian collapse reflected in the initial operational

design of a decapitation strike on Kyiv was partly a product of a system in which subordinates were structurally incentivized to tell decision-makers what they wished to hear.¹²

4.2 Strategic Culture and the Russkiy Mir Ideational Complex

Strategic culture the shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of thought that shape a state elite's understanding of the role of force in international affairs constitutes a critical intervening variable in the NCR framework. Russian strategic culture is characterized by several enduring features: a deeply rooted threat perception shaped by historical experiences of invasion and partition; a statist conception of sovereignty that privileges regime security over individual rights; a civilizational self-understanding that positions Russia as a distinct Eurasian civilization rather than a European nation-state; and an imperial spatial imaginary that views the post-Soviet space as a natural Russian sphere of influence.¹³

The ideational complex of Russkiy Mir the 'Russian World' concept developed by ideologues including Alexander Dugin, Patriarch Kirill, and various Kremlin-affiliated think tanks provided the civilizational legitimation for the Ukraine intervention. By denying the legitimacy of Ukrainian national identity, framing the Ukrainian state as an artificial construct of Western imperial engineering, and invoking the spiritual unity of Eastern Slavic peoples, this ideological framework served as the cultural lens through which systemic strategic incentives were interpreted and through which the decision to invade was rationalized.¹⁴

4.3 State-Society Relations and Domestic Mobilization

The sustainability of Russia's grand strategy depends significantly on the regime's capacity to mobilize domestic resources human, financial, and ideological in support of the war effort. Here the picture is complex. Initial public support for the 'special military operation,' cultivated through decades of state media narrative construction, allowed the regime to prosecute the war without formal mass mobilization for the first seven months. The September 2022 partial mobilization decree which triggered the largest wave of emigration from Russia since the Bolshevik period, with estimates of between 700,000 and one million Russians leaving revealed the limits of voluntary compliance.¹⁵

The June 2023 Wagner Group mutiny led by Yevgeny Prigozhin constituted the most dramatic illustration of elite fragmentation. Though rapidly suppressed and followed by Prigozhin's death in a suspicious plane crash in August 2023 the mutiny exposed fissures within the Siloviki apparatus and demonstrated that the apparent monolithism of Putin's system concealed genuine internal tensions over strategic direction and resource allocation.¹⁶

5. RUSSIA'S GRAND STRATEGIC PILLARS POST-2022

Russia's post-2022 grand strategy can be analytically decomposed into five reinforcing pillars, each targeting a distinct domain of competitive advantage and operating through different instruments of statecraft.

Table 2. Russia's Grand Strategic Pillars Post-2022

Strategic Pillar	Core Objectives	Key Instruments	Vulnerabilities
Military Revisionism	Territorial consolidation in Ukraine; coercive deterrence of NATO intervention	Conventional forces; nuclear signaling; Wagner PMC (pre-2023)	Attrition costs; manpower shortages; equipment losses
Energy Statecraft	Leverage over European energy dependence; resource rents for war economy	Gazprom pipeline diplomacy; LNG expansion eastward; Nord Stream legacy	European diversification (LNG terminals, renewables acceleration)
Informational Warfare	Narrative contestation; delegitimize Western support for Ukraine; domestic cohesion	RT/Sputnik; social media operations; disinformation ecosystems	Platform bans; declining global credibility
Eurasian Integration	Build alternative multipolar bloc; reduce dollar dependence; SCO/CSTO deepening	EAEU; SCO leadership; BRICS expansion; bilateral trade agreements	China's asymmetric dominance within partnership

Nuclear Signaling	Deter direct NATO intervention; coercive bargaining leverage	Iskander-M; hypersonic Kinzhal/Zircon; doctrinal ambiguity	Credibility erosion; risk of miscalculation
Diplomatic Outreach	Prevent global isolation; cultivate Global South neutrality/alignment	BRICS diplomacy; UN bloc voting; African/Middle East engagement	Competing interests; transactional rather than ideological alignment

Note: PMC = Private Military Company; EAEU = Eurasian Economic Union; SCO = Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; BRICS = Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (expanded 2024). Sources: Galeotti (2022); Lo (2023); Trenin (2023).

5.1 Military Revisionism

The military pillar remains the most visible and consequential dimension of Russian grand strategy. The February 2022 invasion reflected a strategy of rapid coercive shock: an initial decapitation attempt against Kyiv, expected to produce either a regime collapse or a negotiated capitulation that would fundamentally alter Ukraine's geopolitical orientation. The failure of this initial phase forced a strategic recalibration toward a grinding war of attrition in the eastern and southern oblasts, leveraging Russia's quantitative advantages in artillery, missiles, and manpower against Ukraine's qualitative advantages in morale, Western intelligence support, and precision weaponry.¹⁷

By 2023-2024, the military campaign had settled into a pattern of positional warfare along a roughly 1,000-kilometre front line, with Russian forces making slow and costly progress in Donbas while Ukraine conducted strategic strikes on Russian territory, naval assets, and logistical infrastructure. The formal annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson) in September 2022 none of which Russia fully controls created a legal and rhetorical commitment that constrained Russian diplomatic flexibility while failing to achieve the consolidation of territorial control that would constitute genuine strategic success.¹⁸

5.2 Energy Statecraft

Prior to 2022, Russian energy exports to Europe accounting for approximately 45 percent of EU gas consumption constituted the most powerful instrument of structural leverage in Moscow's strategic toolkit. The weaponization of energy through the 2021-22 gas supply reductions and the subsequent physical destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022 represented an attempt to exploit this leverage to induce European strategic defection from the Ukraine coalition.¹⁹

The strategy has largely failed. European states accelerated diversification through expanded LNG import infrastructure, renewable energy investment, and demand reduction, achieving a reduction in Russian gas dependency from 45 percent to approximately 8 percent of EU consumption by late 2023. Russia pivoted its hydrocarbon exports eastward toward China, India, and Turkey but at significantly discounted prices and with reduced strategic leverage over purchasing states.²⁰

5.3 Informational Warfare and Narrative Contestation

Russia's informational strategy pursues three interrelated objectives: manufacturing domestic consent for the military operation, delegitimizing Western support for Ukraine in the eyes of Global South audiences, and fracturing the political coalitions sustaining Western governmental positions. The apparatus includes state media (RT, Sputnik), social media influence operations, diplomatic messaging, and the utilization of diaspora networks.²¹ The informational campaign has achieved mixed results. Within Russia, state-controlled narratives have maintained sufficient public acquiescence to prevent mass political opposition, though the emigration of educated, cosmopolitan Russians has both depleted the opposition's domestic base and created vocal anti-war communities in European capitals. Internationally, Russian disinformation has been most effective in African, Latin American, and South Asian contexts where historical anti-Western sentiment and weaker media literacy create receptive audiences.

5.4 Eurasian Institutional Consolidation

Russia's institutional strategy aims to construct an alternative international architecture capable of reducing dependence on Western-dominated financial and trading systems. The SCO, EAEU, and BRICS frameworks serve as platforms for projecting influence among non-Western states, building coalitions capable of frustrating Western sanctions regimes, and projecting a narrative of legitimate multipolarity.²² The 2023 BRICS summit in Johannesburg, which approved the expansion of the grouping to include Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Ethiopia, and Argentina (though Argentina subsequently reversed its accession decision), reflected Russian ambitions to position BRICS as a credible counter-institutional architecture.

5.5 Nuclear Signaling

Nuclear deterrence has functioned as an enabling constraint on Russian strategy limiting Western willingness to provide certain categories of weapons to Ukraine and deterring direct NATO military intervention, while signaling Russian resolve through doctrinal statements, exercises, and deployment decisions. Russia's updated nuclear doctrine (November 2024), which lowered the threshold for nuclear use by permitting a nuclear response to conventional attacks on Russian territory supported by nuclear-armed states, represented a deliberate escalation of nuclear signaling designed to test Western resolve and constrain Ukrainian offensive operations.²³

6. ASSESSMENT OF STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

Table 3 provides a comparative assessment of Russia's stated strategic goals against actual outcomes as of 2024, with NCR explanations for the divergences observed. The pattern that emerges is one of systematic strategic failure on core objectives, offset by partial success in restructuring the global diplomatic environment.

Table 3. Comparative Assessment of Russia's Grand Strategic Outcomes

Strategic Goal	Intended Outcome	Actual Outcome (2024)	NCR Explanation
Prevent NATO Enlargement	Halt/reverse NATO expansion eastward	Sweden and Finland joined NATO (2023-24); alliance energized	Misperception of Western resolve; underestimation of alliance cohesion
Subordinate Ukraine	Install pro-Russian government	Ukrainian state intact; strong national resistance; EU candidacy granted	Strategic culture filter: underestimated Ukrainian identity formation
Fracture Western Alliance	Exploit energy dependence; induce defection	Unprecedented Western unity; \$200bn+ in aid to Ukraine by end-2024	Leader belief error; European energy diversification faster than expected
Sustain War Economy	Maintain GDP and military production through sanctions	Economy adapted; military-industrial output increased; social costs suppressed	Resource extraction capacity; authoritarian state mobilization
Global Alignment South	Build anti-Western bloc; BRICS as counter-hegemonic coalition	Significant neutrality achieved; BRICS expanded 2024; UN votes favorable	Partial success; transactional alignment rather than ideological
Preserve Regime Legitimacy	Domestic support for military operation; suppress dissent	Prigozhin mutiny (June 2023); managed suppression;	Executive autonomy high but elite fragmentation risk remains

		nationalism mobilized	
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Note: UNGA = United Nations General Assembly; EU = European Union. Outcomes assessed as of Q4 2024. Sources: IISS (2024); Kofman (2023); Charap and Priebe (2023).

The most consequential strategic failure has been NATO enlargement. The invasion produced precisely the outcome Russia sought to prevent: Sweden and Finland abandoned decades of military non-alignment and joined NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively, adding approximately 1,300 kilometres of new alliance border with Russia, Nordic military capabilities including advanced air power, and strategically vital control of the Baltic Sea approaches.²⁴ The alliance also dramatically increased its force posture on the Eastern Flank, deploying additional battle groups to the Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania, and approving a new regional defense plans representing the most significant operational planning update since the Cold War.

The failure to subordinate Ukraine is equally stark. Rather than producing a compliant, internally divided Ukrainian state susceptible to Russian pressure, the invasion catalyzed an unprecedented consolidation of Ukrainian national identity, the acceleration of EU candidate status and eventual membership negotiations, and the forging of deep bilateral security partnerships with the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and numerous other states. Ukraine's military transformation from a post-Soviet conventional force to a combat-hardened, Western-equipped, and drone-technology-pioneering army constitutes a strategic reversal of the first order.²⁵

Where Russian strategy has achieved genuine, if limited, success is in the diplomatic restructuring of the Global South. The 2024 UNGA voting patterns show that a majority of the world's population residing in states that have declined to endorse Western-led sanctions or UNGA resolutions condemning the invasion has maintained positions of strategic neutrality or active diplomatic engagement with Moscow. This does not constitute strategic victory, but it does represent a meaningful constraint on the universalization of Western-led isolation.

7. THE RUSSIA-CHINA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: STRUCTURAL ASYMMETRY AND ITS LIMITS

The Russia-China 'no limits' partnership announced in February 2022 days before the invasion represents the most structurally significant dimension of the emerging multipolar order from the perspective of Western grand strategy. Yet an NCR analysis reveals that this partnership is characterized by profound asymmetries that constrain its cohesion and limit its counter-hegemonic potential.

Table 4. Russia-China Strategic Partnership: Asymmetry and Limits

Dimension	Russian Position	Chinese Position
Economic Weight	Junior partner; ~\$220bn bilateral trade (2023); dependent on Chinese consumer goods post-sanctions	Senior partner; trade surplus; key market for Russian hydrocarbons at discounted rates
Technology Transfer	Recipient of dual-use components; dependent on Chinese semiconductors and electronics	Cautious provider; avoids secondary sanctions; prioritises own industrial interests
Geopolitical Goals	Multipolar world as cover for regional hegemony; restoration of sphere of influence	Multipolar rhetoric; cautious; opposes US unipolarity but fears instability spillover
Military Cooperation	Seeks advanced equipment and components; joint exercises; Vostok drills	Provides limited lethal aid; strategic ambiguity; preserves European market access
Ukraine War Stance	Seeks legitimisation of operations; wants diplomatic cover	Abstains in UNGA; nominally neutral; proposed ceasefire framework (Feb 2023)
Strategic Autonomy	Constrained by economic dependence and isolation	Maintains full strategic autonomy; Russia needs China more than vice versa

Note: LNG = Liquefied Natural Gas; UNGA = United Nations General Assembly. Sources: Trenin (2023); Gabuev (2022); Lo (2023).

The structural reality of the Russia-China relationship is one of increasing asymmetry in China's favour. Russia's post-sanctions economic dependence on China for consumer goods, dual-use components, and financial intermediation has transformed what was previously a relationship between two great powers of comparable weight into one resembling junior-senior partnership. China's bilateral trade with Russia reached approximately \$240 billion in 2023, but the terms of trade increasingly reflect Chinese market power: Russian hydrocarbons are exported at substantial discounts from world market prices, while Chinese manufactured goods and technology enter at standard rates.²⁶

Beijing's strategic calculus with respect to Russia is characterized by careful balancing. China benefits from a Russia that is strategically distracted and economically dependent reducing Moscow's capacity to act as an independent great power pole and making Russia a reliable energy supplier at discounted prices but fears a Russian strategic collapse that would create instability on its vast shared border, generate a massive refugee crisis, and hand Washington a decisive geopolitical victory. China has therefore maintained studied ambiguity: providing diplomatic cover, facilitating sanctions evasion through third-country intermediaries, and supplying dual-use goods, while carefully avoiding the direct provision of lethal military assistance that would trigger Western secondary sanctions on Chinese financial institutions.²⁷

From a neoclassical realist perspective, the Russia-China partnership illustrates a fundamental tension within Russia's grand strategy: the imperative to cultivate China as a counterweight to Western pressure simultaneously deepens Russian strategic dependence on Beijing, reducing rather than enhancing Russian autonomy. This creates what might be termed a 'Faustian bargain' at the heart of Russian multipolarity an attempt to escape Western hegemony that progressively entrenches dependence on Chinese hegemony.

8. NUCLEAR STRATEGY AND ESCALATION MANAGEMENT

Russia's nuclear posture constitutes a critical enabling condition for its conventional military operations a form of strategic insurance that limits Western willingness to support Ukraine beyond certain thresholds. The management of nuclear signaling is therefore not peripheral to Russian grand strategy but central to it: by sustaining uncertainty about Russian nuclear thresholds, Moscow seeks to maintain a zone of deterrence that constrains the West's ability to provide maximally effective military support to Ukraine.

Russian nuclear signalling has operated through several channels: doctrinal statements (including the November 2024 update to nuclear doctrine); public statements by senior officials and state media commentators; exercises and demonstrations of nuclear-capable delivery systems; and the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus announced in 2023. The effect has been to create what Western analysts have termed 'nuclear shadow' a constraint on Western policy that has produced measurable effects, including delays in approvals for certain weapons systems, restrictions on Ukrainian use of Western-supplied missiles against Russian territory, and persistent debates within NATO about escalation risk.²⁸

Yet the nuclear signalling strategy also carries risks. Repeated signals that have not been followed by action Russia has threatened nuclear use on numerous occasions without following through risk credibility erosion over time. The fundamental problem for Russian nuclear coercive strategy is the rationality of Western deterrence logic: the threat of nuclear use in response to conventional military defeat in Ukraine would, if executed, be so disproportionate and so contrary to Russia's own survival interests as to lack credibility as a genuine operational signal. The West has, thus far, correctly read the signals as coercive rather than operational though the risk of miscalculation remains a live concern.

9. CONCLUSION:

This paper has applied the neoclassical realist framework to Russia's grand strategy in the post-2022 international order, revealing a pattern of structurally motivated but ideologically distorted and domestically constrained strategic behaviour. The NCR framework has proven analytically productive precisely because it does not force a choice between structural explanation (NATO enlargement as cause) and agential explanation (Putin's imperial ambitions and misperceptions) it accommodates both within a coherent causal architecture.

Russia's grand strategy is best understood as a revisionist great power's attempt to prevent what it perceives as terminal strategic marginalization: the consolidation of a unipolar liberal international order in which Russian sovereignty claims over its perceived sphere of influence are permanently denied. The five strategic pillars military revisionism, energy statecraft, informational warfare, Eurasian institutional consolidation, and nuclear signaling constitute a coherent, if unevenly implemented, response to this strategic predicament.

The central analytical finding is that Russia faces an accelerating capability–aspiration gap. Its strategic ambitions regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space, recognition as an equal co-manager of the international order, the creation of a durable multipolar architecture are calibrated to the material and ideational resources of a great power that Russia no longer unambiguously is. The economic costs of war, the acceleration of Western military support to Ukraine, the enhancement of NATO, and the deepening of strategic dependence on China have all worsened Russia's relative position in ways that compound, rather than resolve, the underlying strategic predicament.

Two scenarios present themselves for the medium-term trajectory of Russian grand strategy. In the first regime continuity with strategic adaptation Russia achieves a frozen conflict in Ukraine, consolidates territorial gains, gradually circumvents the sanctions regime through Asian trade reorientation, and sustains sufficient internal cohesion to prevent elite defection. This scenario preserves the fundamental strategic challenge but manages it without immediate collapse. In the second strategic over-extension the costs of prolonged war outpace the regime's capacity for resource extraction and domestic legitimation, producing either elite-led political change or a negotiated strategic retreat that fundamentally reframes Russian foreign policy ambitions.

What NCR adds to this prospect is the caution that structural pressures do not automatically produce rational strategic adjustment. The ideational rigidities the Putinist worldview, the *Russkiy Mir* civilizational framework, the *Siloviki* institutional interests constitute powerful filters that may delay and distort the translation of material incentives into strategic recalibration. Russia may continue to pursue a strategy that is structurally unsustainable precisely because its decision-making system is structured in ways that suppress corrective feedback. This is the ultimate neoclassical realist warning: in international politics, states can and sometimes do persist in strategic miscalculation until the material costs become so severe that even insulated autocracies cannot avoid confronting them.

The post-2022 international order is being shaped in ways that will outlast the immediate military conflict in Ukraine. Russia's grand strategic choices and their consequences are among the most significant determinants of whether the emerging multipolar order is one of managed competition or sustained systemic conflict. Neoclassical realism, with its attention to both the structural incentives driving state behaviour and the domestic-level variables shaping how those incentives are translated into strategy, provides an indispensable analytical toolkit for navigating that challenge.

NOTES

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