

Assessing the Russo–Ukrainian Conflict of 2022: Unraveling the Putin Doctrine in the Russian Foreign Policy

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Abstract: This article aims to build upon the existing neoclassical realist analysis of Russia's foreign policy in Ukraine during 2022. By introducing a comprehensive analytical framework grounded in neoclassical realism, it seeks to delve into the influence of specific developments and priorities within Russia on its foreign policy conduct towards Ukraine. Contrary to the commonly perceived image of a more assertive and aggressive Russia, recent trends in both foreign and domestic policy reveal an internally conflicted, introspective, and reactive Russia, demonstrating its lack of preparedness to embrace an evolving international role. Through this analysis, it becomes apparent that Putin's uncertainty in effectively addressing the multifaceted challenges and inevitable tensions, whether of domestic or international nature, emerges as a direct consequence of Russian mismanagement in handling foreign policy matters related to Ukraine. Unraveling the complexities and contradictions shaping Russia's actions in the region, this article provides deep insights into the dynamics governing the Ukrainian crisis and its wider implications for global geopolitics.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, conflict management, the Ukrainian crisis, Putin, neoclassical realism.

Introduction

In the context of neoclassical realism, understanding Russia's role as an actor in international conflict management is crucial. One fundamental question is whether Russia is an active or passive conflict resolution actor and why. Additionally, it is essential to explore whether Russia pursues consistent conflict and crisis management policies at both regional and global levels or

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if there are divergent discourses and practices in handling Russian foreign policy. These questions are integral to comprehending the strengths and weaknesses of international actors like Russia in conflict management and its foreign policy approach on regional and international scales.

As a status-seeking actor in an evolving international order, Russia employs a range of conflict management strategies that are shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. Neoclassical realism underscores the significance of considering the interplay between a state's domestic and systemic elements. This suggests that Russia's behavior in conflict management is influenced not only by the dynamics of the international system but also by its internal political, economic, and societal conditions.

By analyzing Russia's responses to the Ukrainian conflict and crisis, it becomes evident that the country utilizes a blend of assertive and diplomatic approaches. On one hand, Russia has demonstrated assertiveness in regions it considers within its sphere of influence, as evident in starting from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and continuing in 2022 as support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine and the attack of Kyiv. On the other hand, Russia also engages in diplomatic efforts and negotiations in certain contexts, highlighting its willingness to resolve conflicts through dialogue. Nevertheless, the consistency of Russia's conflict management policies and practices may vary based on regional and global considerations. While there may be instances of similar approaches in certain regions, divergent discourses and practices may also emerge depending on the specific geopolitical context.

The literature on Russia's conflict management policies highlights the nuanced and context-dependent nature of its approaches. While Russia may exhibit certain patterns of behavior in specific regions, its conflict management strategies are also subject to adaptability based on regional and global considerations, as well as its broader foreign policy objectives. Understanding this complexity is crucial in comprehending Russia's role as a conflict management actor and its implications for regional and global stability.

While a significant body of literature exists on conflict management, there has been limited research exploring neoclassical approaches to international conflict management. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive framework for assessing how neoclassical approaches inform conflict management strategies. Russia's outspoken criticism of the current international order and its aspiration to bolster its global standing as a credible competitor to major powers in global governance aligns with its increasing involvement in international conflict management.

The second noteworthy contribution of this article is its examination of Russian foreign policy in Ukraine through the lens of conflict management within the framework of neoclassical realism. Considering these aspects, this article seeks to scrutinize Russia's position within the international conflict management landscape and decipher the primary

motivations and constraints shaping its role in conflict management. To achieve this goal, the article adopts a neoclassical realism approach to analyze Russia's responses to international crises and seeks to comprehend the effectiveness and functionality of the conflict mechanisms and instruments employed, particularly in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The article begins with a literature review that explores the main analytical tools used to understand the driving factors behind Russia's conflict management strategies and the similarities and differences in its foreign policy. Subsequently, it delves into a theoretical and conceptual evaluation of Russian approaches to conflict management within the framework of neoclassical realism.

In the third section, the analysis provides a fact-based assessment of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This study encompasses both converging and diverging conflict management policies stemming from the nature of the conflict. Through this comprehensive analysis, a deeper understanding of Russian conflict management strategies and their consequences can be gained, especially in the context of key events surrounding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine."

Literature review

Neoclassical realism emerged as an influential theory in international relations, bridging the gap between classical realism's focus on systemic constraints and domestic politics' influence on state behavior. The theory posits that states' actions are not solely driven by systemic pressures but are also shaped by domestic factors, such as leadership perceptions, societal interests, and institutional dynamics. By considering the interplay of both levels, neoclassical realism provides a more comprehensive understanding of state behavior in conflict management (Alibabalu, 2021).

One of the eminent scholars who adeptly explains Russian foreign policy through the lens of neoclassical realism is E. Götz. In his enlightening series of works, framed within the perspective of neoclassical realism, Götz provides a coherent and comprehensive comprehension of Russia's invasion policy toward Ukraine. Götz's rationale becomes evident as he delves into Russia's conduct as a prominent global power, skillfully intertwining geopolitical, domestic, and ideational factors in a foreign policy manner. Within the framework of neoclassical realism, Götz emphasizes the potent strategic and status-driven motivations that major powers, such as Russia, hold in establishing their sphere of influence within neighboring regions. Major Powers have strong incentives to prevent smaller neighboring states from becoming military bridgeheads or allies of extra-regional powers (Götz, 2022). This involves exerting substantial sway over the foreign policy direction of smaller adjacent nations. To realize this objective, major powers employ a spectrum of approaches, encompassing coercion, and subversion, or supportive actions, contingent upon the intensity of external pressures they encounter.

The question of how Russia will navigate conflicts to reconcile its foreign policy goals remains, highlighting a gap in neoclassical realism's explanations. While Götz's work unveils motivations behind Russia's regional engagement, it may not fully capture how Russia plans to resolve and manage conflicts in line with its foreign policy. While Götz's neoclassical realism approach is comprehensive, it could be enhanced to address complexities in conflict resolution within Russia's broader foreign policy scope. This recognition underscores ongoing scholarly inquiry and the evolving international landscape, prompting the refinement of theoretical frameworks for a wider array of scenarios.

In the article *Russian foreign policy in the realm of European security through the lens of neoclassical realism*, E. Kropatcheva explains Russian foreign policy by neoclassical tools she addresses three key questions regarding Russian foreign policy: its consistency and predictability, its cooperative or non-cooperative nature towards the West, and the theoretical perspectives that aid in comprehending Russian policy. This article addresses three main questions regarding Russian foreign policy: its consistency and predictability, its cooperative or non-cooperative stance towards the West, and the theoretical frameworks that aid in comprehending Russian policy. Russia's foreign policy has been consistent in pursuing its main realist interests: maximization of power and security as well as maximization of utilities—military and economic capabilities vis-à-vis the West—but with the help of the West (Kropatcheva, 2012). The article determines that international relations studies involve methodological pluralism, where approaches like “realist constructivism” or “constructivist realism” are utilized, finding common ground between rationalism/realism and constructivism. Neoclassical realism exemplifies this trend by combining various material and subjective explanatory factors for understanding international politics. According to the author, neoclassical realism offers a valuable framework that can enhance our understanding of complex political processes in countries like Russia, where such factors as prestige/status, and dualist policy with the West, wield substantial influence and directly respond to international dynamics. This is why Russian foreign policy is compensatory and cooperation and non-cooperation coexist (Kropatcheva, 2012). In this context, neoclassical realism serves as a versatile analytical tool that allows for a comprehensive exploration of theoretical explanations.

By incorporating neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework, a multi-methodological approach becomes both viable and insightful. This method entails utilizing a diverse range of research techniques to gain a deeper insight into the complexities of political processes and their resulting outcomes. While the essay does explore the interaction between Russia's cooperative and non-cooperative tendencies in relation to the West, it does not explicitly delve into the methodologies that Russia employs to manage conflicts that might arise from these interactions. Introducing conflict management methodologies would add another layer of analysis, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how Russia navigates potential conflicts in its engagement with the West.

Certainly, integrating conflict management theory into the essay's findings could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Russia's foreign policy dynamics interact with conflict management strategies. Conflict management within the neoclassical realism framework can provide insights into how Russia responds to international challenges while considering both material power dynamics and subjective factors like perceptions, emotions, and historical memory. By applying neoclassical realism's multi-dimensional perspective, researchers can dissect the interactions between leadership, foreign policy choices, and international conflicts, offering a richer and more nuanced explanation of the observed outcomes.

In the article titled *Contesting Liberal Peace: Russia's Emerging Model of Conflict Management*, David Lewis (2022) examines Russia's approach to peace-building as a tool of foreign policy. Lewis argues that Russia's interpretation of the liberal concept of peacebuilding is used to further its revisionist foreign policy objectives. The article discusses how Russia has formulated a distinct method of conflict management and stabilization, rooted in its counter-norm entrepreneurship demonstrated in past conflicts like Chechnya. While this emerging model lacks a fully developed doctrine, it exhibits common traits across various cases where Russia has played a significant role. These instances encompass conflicts in Eastern Ukraine, Georgia, Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Central African Republic (CAR), Afghanistan, the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), Yemen, Mozambique, and Mali. Russia's involvement has varied, ranging from deploying official military forces with host government consent (e.g., Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh) to intervening against central governments (Georgia, Ukraine). Its roles have included diplomatic mediation as well as deploying unofficial auxiliary forces.

The main points include combined interventions, state focus, and critique of Western involvement. Russia employs a mix of military pressure and diplomacy, engages key players, and prefers state-centered solutions to Western-style peace efforts. Lewis argues Russia's foreign policy shift presents an alternative approach to global conflicts, positioning it as a peacemaker and counterbalance to the West. Constitutional amendments in 2020 underpin Russia's commitment to peace, security, and non-interference. President Putin cites the Syrian model for resolving crises and sees potential for similar approaches, like with the Korean Peninsula. Russia's conflict engagement aims to boost its global influence strategically. Some Russian thinkers view this as enhancing its role as a peacemaker in geopolitical rivalry with the West, historically aligned with Russia's restraining influence. This view suggests Russia counters perceived Western-led liberalism, bolstering global stability.

Lewis (2022) contends that Western efforts to instill liberal peace-building norms in Russia have failed, leading to a norm contestation process. Russia has established its own counter-norms and conflict management model, diverging from liberal democracies. This context-dependent approach prioritizes order, state authority, and mediation,

departing from Western justice-oriented strategies. Thus, Lewis's work reveals Russia's unique conflict management evolution and its counterbalance to Western norms.

The process of norm contestation within Russia is rooted in its pursuit of both status and security. The diffusion of Western norms challenged Russia's desired role as a global norm and rule influencer. Additionally, Western interventions in various conflicts and the history of liberal peace-building were perceived as security risks to Russia's interests. In response, Russia established its own set of norms, reasserting its position as a norm creator and offering a justifying narrative for its security-oriented actions. Russia's thinking on international security was already moving in a different direction, fuelled by both domestic and international factors (Lewis, 2022).

While valuing the role of the UN Security Council in conflict management and supporting peacekeeping operations, Russia's approach diverges from traditional UN norms. Instead, Russia's behavior aligns more with "reactionary" revisionism, aiming to restore the norms, rules, and institutions of great power politics. This perspective reflects a "realist peace" ideology that prioritizes state-centered order and regional power dynamics. Concurrently, an ideological dimension introduces anti-liberal and anti-Western elements. According to Russia, the West contributes to issues rather than solutions; its involvement should be managed and minimized. This stance is not just a geopolitical assertion but also a normative one: Russia views Western pluralist, liberal peace-building efforts as destabilizing and ineffective in halting conflicts (Lewis, 2022).

This dualistic strategy presents potential trajectories for Russia's norm contestation. One trajectory could involve gravitating toward a more widely accepted realist model of conflict management within an evolving international system. On the other hand, an alternative trajectory might involve adopting a more radical normative stance, fueled by anti-Western sentiment and ideological opposition to liberalism. This could further deepen the rift between Russia and the West, complicating efforts to find common ground on matters of peace and conflict. The strategy also serves to reassert Russia's role as a rule-shaper and norm-maker in international affairs, offering a legitimating discourse for the country's actions taken to safeguard its perceived security interests (Lewis, 2022).

These three articles serve as the foundational pillars for the forthcoming analysis in this current work. The central thesis revolves around the concept that Russia represents a state characterized by a complex state system, historically centered on leadership. Götz and E. Kropatcheva assert the necessity of scrutinizing Russia through the lens of neoclassical realism, a framework aimed at providing deeper insights into the intricate dynamics of Russian politics. Meanwhile, D. Lewis indirectly supports the notion that a certain revisionist perspective is essential in understanding conflict management when applied to Russia.

Numerous variables shape Russia's approach to conflict resolution. This article aims to expand upon the viewpoints put forth by various authors and propose a distinctive perspective on how Russia manages conflicts. In reality, however, Russia's thinking on international security had already been shifting in a different direction, fueled by both domestic and international factors (Lewis, 2022). The tensions between Russia and the West have culminated in the current crisis in Ukraine, which threatens not only to devastate society but also to unravel all the progress achieved in building greater peace and security in Europe and the world since the end of the Cold War (Cross, 2018).

The lens of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 will serve as an illustrative case to explore the specifics of Russia's conflict perception and foreign policy formulation. This comprehensive analysis seeks to uncover the nuanced layers that influence Russia's conflict resolution strategies.

It is essential to delve into the distinctive nature of Russia's political system and its consequential impact on foreign policy, focusing on the nation's unique approach to conflict management. Throughout various historical conflicts, Russia has consistently exhibited a distinctive vision of conflict resolution, using it as a means to advance its foreign policy objectives in contrast to the Western peace-building model. This paper contends that conventional explanations of conflict management inadequately capture the nuanced and multifaceted character of Russian conflict management strategies. To address this gap, the application of neoclassical realism emerges as a promising theoretical framework for comprehending Russia's conflict management policies, specifically exemplified through the case study of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

This study involves a comprehensive examination and synthesis of neoclassical realism through the lens of conflict management. By contextualizing Russia's political system and historical heritage, this review establishes the groundwork for comprehending the nation's distinctive conflict management approach. Conventional methods of conflict management, often rooted in Western paradigms of peacebuilding and conflict resolution, prove inadequate in encapsulating Russia's distinct viewpoint.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-method approach that integrates elements of Neoclassical Realism and conflict management theories to analyze the dynamics of international relations. The combination of these two theoretical frameworks allows for a comprehensive exploration of both structural and agency-driven factors in understanding conflicts and their management.

Neoclassical Realism provides a nuanced understanding of how domestic and international factors interact to shape state behavior in the international system. Drawing upon this framework, the study will first analyze the underlying structural factors,

including the distribution of power, relative capabilities, and alliances, to comprehend the broader context within which conflicts emerge.

The conflict management perspective emphasizes strategies and mechanisms that states employ to prevent, mitigate, or resolve conflicts. By integrating this approach, the study will focus on the actions taken by states and other international actors to manage conflicts effectively. This involves examining diplomatic negotiations, conflict resolution processes, and the role of third-party mediators.

The cases for analysis will be selected based on their relevance to the research question and the diversity of conflict types, geographic regions, and levels of intensity. These cases will be chosen with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between Neoclassical Realism and conflict management in different international contexts.

Primary data will be collected through a combination of archival research, content analysis of official documents, and interviews with relevant stakeholders. Secondary data, such as existing conflict databases and historical records, will also be utilized to supplement the analysis and provide broader context. Qualitative data analysis will involve thematic coding of textual sources and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and themes related to conflict management strategies and their alignment with neoclassical realist predictions. Quantitative data analysis will involve statistical techniques to test hypotheses and identify correlations between variables.

Neoclassical Realism and Conflict Management in Action, the Russian Invasion into Ukraine, 2022

In the realm of international relations theory, conflict management is a crucial framework for comprehending state interactions and foreign policy decisions, emphasizing the intricate interplay between systemic influences and domestic factors. This approach acknowledges that conflicts are inherent due to differing interests and power dynamics, and highlights the role of strategies, mechanisms, and diplomacy in mitigating disputes while minimizing violence. It recognizes that while systemic factors shape the international environment, domestic considerations like political institutions, public opinion, and strategic interests significantly influence a state's conflict management approach. By promoting multilateral institutions and diplomatic efforts, conflict management seeks to prevent conflicts from escalating and contribute to global stability.

Nevertheless, the effective implementation of conflict management strategies hinges on a comprehensive understanding of the roots and developmental pathways of conflicts. In order to grasp the diverse origins of conflicts, a thorough exploration of the participating states becomes imperative. This understanding forms the bedrock upon which conflict management endeavors are built, facilitating a more detailed and targeted approach to

conflict resolution. An exploration of the developmental trajectory of conflicts unveils the evolution of tensions, interactions, and escalations that lead to open hostilities. This chronological understanding helps identify crucial moments where intervention or diplomacy has a role to play.

“In the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse and the end of the Cold War, which left realists somewhat uncertain about their ability to formulate grand-scale theories, Neoclassical realism has experienced substantial growth over the past two decades (Smith, 2018). During this period, there has been a concerted effort to elevate Neoclassical realism beyond a mere theoretically informed toolkit. One of the distinctive contributions of Neoclassical realism lies in its exploration of the mechanisms through which domestic political dynamics can compel leaders to pursue seemingly counter-productive foreign policies (Lobell *et al.*, 2009).

In this regard, neoclassical realists argue that while the qualities and beliefs of individual leaders do exert influence on foreign policy decisions, systemic elements such as the architecture of the international system and the distribution of power among states hold a predominant sway over a country’s behavior on the global stage. This heightened emphasis on systemic factors sets Neoclassical realism apart from alternative realist and liberal perspectives. Consequently, it becomes evident that Russia, despite the individual point of view of leaders like Putin, remains entrenched within the international system and is expected to adhere to widely accepted norms of conflict resolution. However, the interpretation and application of these norms by Putin and other leaders can lead to distinct processes and outcomes, underscoring the nuanced interplay between individual and systemic influences.

Understanding Russia’s strategy for conflict management within the framework of established peace-building theories poses challenges due to its unconventional methods and revisionist foreign policy orientation. However, to gain deeper insights into Russia’s peace-building tactics, the neoclassical realist framework proves to be a valuable analytical tool. Neoclassical realism holds particular relevance when examining Russia’s conflict management approach, as it combines the structural principles of realism in international relations with the domestic dynamics that shape a nation’s foreign policy decisions. A compelling case study that underscores the neoclassical realist perspective is the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By analyzing this invasion through the lens of systemic factors, particularly the perceived threat to Russian interests, we can illuminate the motivations underlying Russia’s actions.

Systemic stimuli

Since 2015, a series of systemic events have propelled Russia towards a more assertive stance, fostering an increased sense of power within its leadership. Moreover, the persistently provocative nature of the ongoing civil war in Ukraine, despite numerous

attempts at achieving a ceasefire, has compelled Russia to perceive a direct threat to its national interests. This evolving foreign policy has led Russia to conceptualize a new world order taking shape. This perception has been further solidified by the relatively tempered response from Western powers regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea. Additionally, Russia's partial successes in various conflicts across the Middle East have suggested to both its leadership and the international community that Russia is capable of actively shaping global dynamics.

At the core of this evolving approach lies an understanding, particularly prominent in figures like Putin, that the international community can accommodate a proactive foreign policy. This has emboldened Russia to continue its assertive actions, as demonstrated during the events in Ukraine in 2022. Notably, these actions mirror the trajectory set started by Russia's involvement in the Georgian conflict of 2008.

The chosen approach of active engagement in regional affairs holds significant strategic value for Russia. It is perceived as a justifiable method of protecting its interests, even if it results in international scrutiny and restrictions. This proactive involvement, aligned with Russia's perceived role as a major power in the emerging global order, underscores the nation's strategic maneuvering and its aspirations to attain a more influential position in international affairs. In addition, Russia's actions in the Security Council exemplify this interaction. The dissolution of the Soviet Union left Russia grappling with feelings of vulnerability and diminished stature. In response, it embarked on a trajectory to reassert its influence in global affairs, driven by both systemic balancing against perceived Western dominance and a yearning for renewed great power status. This dual strategy underpins Russia's search for partners who align with its vision of international norms, particularly regarding state sovereignty and multipolarity.

Russia's pursuit of like-minded partners reflects the neoclassical realist notion of balancing, where it seeks to counterbalance the overwhelming influence of the United States and its allies. Through alliances with states sharing similar concerns about unipolarity, such as China, India, and members of the BRICS group, Russia endeavors to reshape the international order into one that accommodates multipolarity and a broader distribution of power.

In a joint Sino-Russian statement on "foreign relations in a new era" released ahead of the February 2022 Olympics, the leaders emphasized that "certain actors representing a minority on the international stage continue to advocate unilateral approaches to resolving international issues and resort to the use of force. They intervene in the internal affairs of other states, infringing upon their legitimate rights and interests, inciting contradictions, disagreements, and confrontation, thereby impeding the development and progress of mankind, despite opposition from the international community" (Putin, 2022).

Simultaneously, Russia employs a bandwagoning strategy, cooperating with more influential actors like China on issues aligned with its interests, such as opposition to Western-led interventions. This dual approach underscores the pragmatic nature of Russia's conflict management, driven by a mix of power calculations and alignment with compatible norms. Neoclassical Realism illuminates the intricate dynamics driving Russia's engagement with the UN Security Council. By considering the confluence of systemic pressures, domestic imperatives, and leadership attributes, this framework underscores that Russia's quest for partners to share its vision of international norms is a calculated response to its historical experiences, power aspirations, and the evolving dynamics of the international system.

Additionally, Similar to the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, the international atmosphere preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was characterized as anti-Russian. The country's leadership, particularly Putin, perceived this as an aggressive policy and subsequently formulated countermeasures. The extensive support provided to the Ukrainian army by the United States and NATO following the Crimea invasion further reinforced this perception. Putin underscored this sentiment in his speech announcing a large-scale Russian offensive against Ukraine, stating, "Included in this array are pledges not to expand NATO's presence one inch to the east. I reiterate: we were deceived, or to put it simply, played for fools. While politics is often regarded as a rough game, its present state surpasses acceptable bounds. Such behavior not only contradicts the tenets of international relations but also challenges universally accepted norms of morality and ethics. Where is justice and truth in this? Only falsehoods and hypocrisy prevail" (Putin, 2022).

Neoclassical realists posit that these motivations compelled Russia into a crisis with potential repercussions for the international system. The shift in power dynamics in Eastern Europe brought about by the Ukraine crisis was perceived by Russia as a strategic opportunity that it could not afford to overlook, leading to the utilization of military intervention in the Ukrainian crisis. The systemic perspective offered by neoclassical realism underscores its relevance in comprehending this intervention, as it considers both systemic influences and Putin's personal perspective on Ukraine. In his post-invasion statement, Putin explicitly highlighted his unique viewpoint on international dynamics, stating, "The U.N. Charter has a provision about the right of nations to self-determination... This was the case with Kosovo. Is the situation between the Donetsk Republic and the Luhansk Republic not the same? It is the same" (Putin, 2022). Anchored in Putin's individual interpretation of the global framework and given the significant parallels between Kosovo and Ukraine, this standpoint has acted as a driving force behind his extended military engagement in the Ukrainian conflict.

Putin's statement serves as a stark illustration of Russia's firm resistance to any form of external interference, particularly from Western nations, when it comes to resolving

conflicts. Given the depth of the country's conflict with the West, the exceptionalist position prevails in Russia (Tsygankov, 2023). Within this context, the presence of United Nations missions or observers is seen as an immediate and tangible challenge to Russia's vested interests within the Ukrainian context. The implication is that Russia views these interventions as potential encroachments on its influence and control in the region, leading to heightened tensions and suspicions. Nonetheless, amid these intricate dynamics, discernible strategic maneuvering becomes evident on Russia's part. What remains clear is that Russia exploited the conflict to advance its strategic interests (Götz, 2022).

Systemic modifiers

Systemic influences, as exemplified by the Crimean crisis, have played a pivotal role in shaping Russia's approach to conflict dynamics in 2022. The inert response of the international community to the annexation of Crimea inadvertently granted Russia a confident endorsement, thus fueling its proactive foreign policy stance. Structurally, the international landscape communicated to Russia that the Western peacebuilding norms had waned due to the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 era. Consequently, operating within the paradigm of multipolarity, Russia became inclined to assert and safeguard its position within the global order.

To begin with, the favorable economic conditions prevailing in Russia, coupled with the relatively limited imposition of sanctions, served as promising indicators within Putin's strategic deliberations. This anticipation led him to believe that the Russian economy could endure an engagement in an active medium-sized military conflict. Neoclassical realism underscores the significance of diverse factors such as economic prowess, military technology, geographical proximity, and control over specific territories as pivotal drivers influencing the behavior of actors, consequently elevating the probability of conflict proliferation. These aspects assume particular relevance in comprehending Russia's strategy for conflict resolution.

As demonstrated in the Crimean annexation, Russia's estimation of its military might played a significant role. The assumption that its military capabilities were sufficiently robust to achieve swift control over Ukraine shaped its strategy. The successful outcome of the Syrian war further emboldened Russia's belief in its military prowess, bolstering its confidence for success in the conflict with Ukraine.

Control over conquered territories holds pivotal importance as it emboldens actors to undertake audacious actions. Russia's relatively effortless annexation of Crimea led to the presumption that it could similarly exert authority over Ukraine. Ukraine's geographical adjacency to Russia, coupled with its strategic positioning for military operations, provided further impetus for Putin's convictions. The Russian military's potential to seamlessly address logistical requirements also boosted his confidence.

Moreover, Putin's calculation was that control over the eastern Ukrainian region's natural resources could defray the financial costs incurred by the military operation. The assessment of Putin's conflict management vision and his perception of the dynamics of the conflict undoubtedly played a decisive role in the invasion's calculation. An in-depth analysis of Putin's conflict management approach could potentially shed light on any miscalculations or strategic oversights in his conflict management vision.

Relative distribution of power and polarity

The international system underwent significant transformation during the 2010s, driven notably by the systemic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the election of John Biden as the US president. These shifts signaled a transition towards a normative order within the international system. In response, Russia has sought to consolidate its position by forging an alignment with China against the United States and Western powers. Drawing historical analogies, Putin likened the perceived threats from Ukraine and the West to Nazi Germany's assault on the USSR. This comparison led him to the conclusion that passivity in the face of such perceived threats was untenable.

This alignment and Putin's historical analogy underscore Russia's distinct vision concerning existing international norms and processes in conflict development and management. The alliance with China exemplifies Russia's strategic approach to both aligning against established norms and fostering new ones. By joining forces, Russia and China aim to shape the evolution of conflict and spread their particular foreign policy perspectives, challenging prevailing paradigms.

In essence, the dynamics elucidated above provide a compelling demonstration of Russia's distinct approach to navigating existing international norms and shaping conflict management strategies. The partnership with China serves as a vehicle for not only challenging established norms but also constructing alternative ones. Through this approach, Russia is actively participating in the reconfiguration of the international system, reflecting its unique interpretation of global dynamics and conflict resolution strategies.

"The attempt to appease the aggressor ahead of the Great Patriotic War proved to be a mistake that came at a high cost for our people. In the first months after the hostilities broke out, we lost vast territories of strategic importance, as well as millions of lives. We will not make this mistake the second time. We have no right to do so" (Putin, 2022). According to Putin, the West-centered world is coming to an end and actors like Russia need to consolidate their positions in the new world. "The historical period of the West's undivided dominance over world affairs is coming to an end" (Putin, 2022).

Putin justifies his position by drawing upon historical lessons gleaned from the Great Patriotic War, wherein attempts to appease an aggressor led to severe repercussions for

the Russian populace. Determined not to replicate that historical error, he underscores the imperative for Russia to solidify its standing within a transforming global order. Putin contends that the epoch of Western supremacy over global affairs is waning, giving rise to a multipolar world characterized by distinct visions of conflict resolution, often tailored to each nation's context rather than adhering to international (predominantly Western, in Putin's view) norms.

Within this framework, Putin perceives limitations within the international system that hinder Russia's capacity to assert its interests effectively. Crucially, he does not view prominent global actors as direct adversaries, a sentiment indicative of his belief in Russia's potency and unique status within the conflict. This confidence in Russia's strength, rendering it unparalleled in the ongoing conflict, informs Putin's reluctance to entertain the mediation efforts of Western leaders. This sentiment is perhaps exemplified by his conduct, such as the symbolic action of publicly reprimanding French President Emmanuel Macron. While emblematic in nature, such actions underscore Putin's perception that these significant international actors are not positioned as direct competitors or rivals.

Putin explains his rationale for his stance is rooted in historical lessons, particularly from the Great Patriotic War, wherein he espouses the importance of not yielding to aggression. He emphasizes Russia's imperative to solidify its role amidst a transforming global order. Putin's view rejects the notion of Western dominance, anticipating a multipolar world with diverse conflict resolution paradigms. This perspective informs his confidence in Russia's position and, consequently, his reluctance to engage with Western leaders as rivals. This discourse highlights Putin's distinct perspective on global dynamics and his interpretation of how the international system is functioning.

However, in the intricate dynamics of a multipolar global system, the inherent complexities of conflict management often lead to potential miscalculations among major powers, such as an overestimation of their strengths. While the neoclassical perspective sheds light on how the structural attributes of this system influenced Putin's approach to conflict resolution, delving deeper into understanding how he arrived at decisions and subsequent actions requires a more comprehensive examination at a more detailed level. Undoubtedly, the political transformation of the international system created false promises for Putin regarding the implementation of his plans, as he had announced at the Munich Conference in 2007.

The waves of transformation that have swept the international landscape since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted Russia's behavior in 2022. However, Putin's specific choice was the result of a subtle interplay between systemic factors and his individual inclinations. This fusion of external influences and personal tendencies highlights the intricacies of the interplay between international relations theories and the practical realm of conflict management. This convergence is

essential for a thorough understanding of the complexities that have shaped Russia's behavior in the context of the Ukrainian situation in 2022.

Clarity

Neoclassical realists emphasize both the significance and visibility of threats. When these threats become evident, states are compelled to respond proactively. However, it is equally vital to consider the impact of information pollution, as misinformation and its influence on state actors' responses can lead to unforeseen dangers in interpreting and managing conflicts. In this context, Putin's tendency to perceive threats to Ukraine underscores Russia's feeling of being encircled by potential hazards. According to Putin, the threat emanating from Ukraine is particularly conspicuous, leading him to believe that Russia could face an attack from Ukrainian territory at any given moment. Moreover, he expresses concerns about a potential NATO assault originating from Ukraine against Russia, thereby underscoring his view of the threat stemming from Ukrainian NATO membership. This perspective sheds light on Putin's outlook on the global system, where he identifies potential risks and dangers posed by neighboring nations. This mindset encourages Putin to prioritize an active foreign policy over passive conflict resolution strategies.

The neoclassical realist viewpoint accentuates the pivotal role of threat perception in shaping a state's behavior and, consequently, its conflict management tactics. In Putin's case, perceived threats originating from Ukraine significantly influence Russia's political choices and determine its approach to conflicts. Understanding the nuances of how these threats are perceived is crucial for comprehending Russia's interactions with its neighbors and the broader international arena.

Putin's statements on this matter are indicative, as he states, "the fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians have consistently, rudely, and unabashedly created for Russia from year to year. I am referring to the eastward expansion of NATO, which is pushing its military infrastructure ever closer to the Russian border" (Putin, 2022). Additionally, Putin underscores the consistent influx of arms into Ukraine since 2014, along with substantial financial backing, training, and equipment from the United States and other Western actors. This considerable support, coupled with the integration of Ukraine's military command structure into NATO, intensifies the perceived threat to Russia.

Thus, Putin's point is evident: the perceived but deceptive threat of a NATO attack and its immediate repercussions on Russia's key strategic locations render a peaceful conflict resolution improbable. These explicit threats not only unsettle Russia but also prompt it to mobilize resources rather than initiate negotiations. Nevertheless, a pertinent question arises: Why is Putin so transparent about these threats? In fact, has Putin escalated these threats? His explicit preference for revisionist policies over

peacebuilding strategies reflects his belief that a historically revisionist stance aligns better with Russia's historical context than peacebuilding strategies dictated by the prevailing international environment.

Putin's explicit acknowledgment of the risks posed by Ukraine underscores the gravity of these perceived threats and, consequently, shapes Russia's strategic calculations. By opting for revisionist policies over peacebuilding strategies, Putin underscores his conviction that historical context takes precedence over adherence to the contemporary international status quo.

Permissive strategic environment

The inactive response from international players in February 2022 played a role in Putin's decision to initiate a military operation in Ukraine. The Russian military aimed to shape global public opinion through extensive military drills. The Biden administration signaled to Russia that it would not take strong measures in retaliation. Additionally, disagreements between the US and certain NATO members shifted the strategic balance in Russia's favor. In the aftermath of COVID-19, this scenario has led to a situation where weaker actors lack the capacity to effectively counter Russia without external support, while external actors have been weakened by the pandemic. Russia exploited the global context to pursue diverse forms of assertive foreign policy. Owing to unique historical origins, geographical position, cultural connections, and economic-political priorities, Russia exhibited distinct responses to the same international conflicts. This approach suggests that Russia can collaborate to prevent, resolve, or alter conflicts aligning with their national interests within global governance frameworks.

Against this backdrop, Putin's trip to China ahead of the Ukrainian operation underscored the advantageous strategic milieu for the impending invasion. Evidently, Putin's visit aimed to at least secure China's non-opposition, considering its status as a permanent UN Security Council member.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, as evident from announcements by Russian and Chinese authorities, transformed the international system into one susceptible to their influence. Russia's push to garner support from allies in the UN Security Council highlighted its perceived capability to attain objectives within this accommodating international framework. Simultaneously, this action violated established international norms by launching an attack on Ukraine without adhering to these norms. Nevertheless, Putin's strategy for managing the conflict was fraught with challenges, leading subsequent events to reveal significant costs for Russia in pursuing a prominent role in the system.

Russia's decisions stem from a variety of factors including geopolitical calculations, historical precedents, and strategic aims. Driven by these motives, Russia is compelled to bolster its proactive foreign policy across various realms of international politics,

encompassing conflict resolution. This proactive stance prompts Russia to take vigorous foreign policy steps as it actively seeks allies and forges strategic partnerships. This configuration can influence outcomes across multiple dimensions, spanning interactions with major global powers, formal and informal international organizations, and diplomatic ties with less developed and developing nations.

Unit-level analysis of the Ukrainian crisis

In the 2010s, notable achievements in foreign policy bolstered Putin's standing in domestic politics. Neoclassical realists underscore the significance of the structure and dynamics of interactions within domestic politics, influencing a nation's reactions to international pressures. This facet is also pivotal in comprehending Russia's incursion into Ukraine and its inclination towards a revisionist foreign policy, rather than adopting liberal conflict-management strategies.

Strategic Culture

The strategic culture of the actors is reflected in the policy they follow in the international arena (Alibabalu, 2020). The strategic culture of Russia has undergone significant shifts due to key events such as the Georgia operation, annexation of Crimea, involvement in Syria, and intervention in Libya. These events have left a profound impact on the country's strategic thinking and overall outlook. The perceived passivity of the West, particularly during the annexation of Crimea, contributed to Russia's perception of its capacity to undertake bolder actions. This bolstered Putin's confidence in Russia's ability to navigate strategic challenges and effectively manage conflicts within this context.

Elias Götz and Jørgen Staune (2022) point out that Russia's historical apprehension of the West, combined with its self-perception as a superpower, has played a pivotal role in shaping its recent actions. Firstly, Russia has displayed a willingness to establish buffer zones along its borders as a response to its historical fear of Western encroachment. Secondly, Russia's aspiration to maintain a sphere of influence in the Eurasian region aligns with its self-identification as a major global player.

The evolution of Russia's strategic culture has led to the adoption of a revisionist conflict management strategy, largely due to the minimal resistance encountered in previous attempts at conflict resolution. This approach involves pursuing policies that actively advance national interests and challenge the status quo. This revisionist strategy has become ingrained in Russian foreign policy, particularly when circumstances demand a proactive stance. This paradigm shift has been widely accepted within the foreign policy community.

Ukraine, traditionally seen as a buffer state between Russia and the West, altered its stance by adopting an anti-Russian position. This shift was perceived by Russia as a

betrayal of Ukraine's historical role. In the eyes of Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet countries fall within its sphere of influence (Götz, 2015). The institutionalization of military operations following the annexation of Crimea reflects this perspective. Not wanting to lose influence over Ukraine, the Kremlin decided to switch from soft power to hard power (Götz, 2015). Consequently, the 2022 operation in Ukraine can be understood as an extension of this entrenched tradition in Russian strategy inside and outside the post-Soviet space but also and above all to confirm the escalation of the revisionist objectives pursued both at the regional and global level (Pisciotta,2020).

Leader's perception

Leaders do not always respond rationally to systemic stimuli. Even if they correctly perceive the threats and incentives of the international system, they may follow suboptimal or irrational decision-making processes that could lead to policy responses at odds with systemic requirements (Ripsman,2011). As mentioned earlier, understanding Russia's leader Putin's worldview is crucial when analyzing the ongoing conflict. Putin draws a parallel between himself and Peter the Great (The Guardian, 2022). During Peter the Great's reign (1672–1725), conflict management played a pivotal role in shaping Russia's foreign policy and domestic transformation. This era witnessed significant geopolitical challenges, military campaigns, and endeavors to modernize Russia. Peter's approach to conflict management incorporated a combination of military strength, diplomacy, and state-building initiatives. Similarly, Putin envisions a resurgence of Russia to its former prominent global position. He regards Russia as a historical superpower and asserts its impending reclamation of this role. He points out that a discernible polarization is occurring, both globally and internally within Russia. In his view, this polarization will work to Russia's advantage, allowing them to shed unnecessary and detrimental aspects while removing hindrances to their progress. This, in turn, will generate momentum and expedite the developmental pace, as modern progress is contingent upon sovereignty (Putin, 2022).

Putin consistently directs accusations toward Western entities, highlighting the array of threats that Russia faces, ranging from cultural influences to conflict management calling as Western interests. "Frankly speaking, many people linked with the Western economies were in favor of developing relations with them without being conduits of Western interests. But now that they were deprived of everything, what support will they give? They will say: "Darn you!" (Putin, 2022).

Putin's perspective continues: "Properly speaking, the attempts to use us in their interests never ceased until quite recently: they sought to destroy our traditional values and impose their false values on us, values that would erode us and our people from within. These are the same attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their own countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration because

they contradict human nature. This will not come to pass. No one has succeeded in doing so before, nor will they succeed now” (Putin, 2022).

Based on these premises, it can be posited that Russia aims to safeguard its interests across economic, political, and global spheres during times of international crises. Putin’s conflict management strategy stems from a steadfast belief in Russia’s status as a major power, which is why he often alludes to the Cold War era. Throughout the Cold War, the two superpowers adopted diverse approaches to conflict management, largely influenced by their ideological rivalry and strategic priorities. The United States and its allies frequently supported anti-communist factions or movements, whereas the Soviet Union aligned with governments and groups embracing socialist or communist ideologies (Westad, 2005).

Drawing from his unwavering faith in Russia’s superpower status, Putin also leverages his influence within international organizations such as the United Nations. He utilizes his veto power in the UN Security Council to either endorse or hinder resolutions related to conflicts, thereby molding the international response. Superpowers could collaborate to either resolve conflicts or become entangled in power struggles that obstruct peaceful resolutions, aligned with Putin’s perception of Russia’s national interest (Masters, 2022).

Domestic institutions

Russian revisionist conflict management is reflected in Putin’s deliberate efforts to maintain control over state institutions, allowing him to eliminate barriers and promptly execute conflict management strategies. According to the neoclassical perspective, the level of coordination among these institutions plays a pivotal role in shaping a country’s foreign policy. During Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine in February 2022, a conspicuous absence of dissenting voices within state institutions underscored a high degree of coordination.

The Judiciary, Duma (the Russian parliament), and Cabinet seamlessly collaborated in carrying out Putin’s foreign policy directives and conflict management measures, which can be viewed as an extension of his personal agenda. This alignment resembled the functioning of a private firm under Putin’s command. Notably, the United Russia party, of which Putin is a member, held an overwhelming 72 percent majority in the Duma in 2022 (Freedom House, 2022). This significant control facilitated the parliamentary endorsement of foreign policy initiatives, including peacebuilding endeavors (“Mirotvochestvo”) and border operations. This dynamic highlighted the extent of Putin’s influence over these institutional spheres. For instance, following the 2022 attack, the Duma formally requested Putin’s recognition of Donetsk and Lugansk, effectively creating a legal pathway for subsequent actions (TASS, 2022). Other state bodies followed suit, emphasizing the simultaneous implementation of Putin’s instructions during the intervention in Ukraine in 2022. The extended tenures of Foreign Minister

Lavrov since 2004 and Defense Minister Shoigu since 2012 have further underscored Putin's significant influence in these pivotal positions and institutions.

However, the situation becomes more intricate when considering non-state institutions. Numerous entities outside the state apparatus opposed Putin's decision and openly criticized his approach to conflict resolution. The relatively limited role of these institutions in the broader Russian political system contributed to their passive response to the conflict; those who expressed their opinions openly faced imprisonment or left Russia. From an institutional standpoint, this conflict can be interpreted as a revisionist attempt, but it does not align with the objective of achieving successful conflict management in the region.

State-society relationship

Aligned with neoclassical realist viewpoints, leaders often depend on societal backing to amass the resources necessary for foreign policy and its offshoot, conflict management, demanding a certain degree of public contentment with the state's actions. Nevertheless, Russia's distinct circumstances showcase a different scenario where the state's control over abundant natural resources have significantly fortified Putin's authority. Even as surveys indicate public resistance to military endeavors such as the annexation of Crimea and involvement in the Syrian conflict, Putin has chosen to disregard this opposition. The shift towards a more authoritarian regime during the 2010s brought about an increasing disconnect between Putin and society. Despite this gap, he adeptly harnessed influential media platforms to convey his objectives to the public. Consequently, a survey conducted a month after the onset of the Ukraine conflict in 2022 disclosed that a substantial 70 percent of the Russian population endorsed Putin's crisis management approach regarding Ukraine. This statistic underscores the potent sway of media, particularly in authoritarian contexts, and underscores the potential for revisionist conflict management. Although this level of endorsement has waned as the conflict has unfolded, it's crucial to acknowledge that Putin employs diverse strategies to sway public sentiment. Neoclassical realists contend that statesmen strive to employ relatable language to rally the population. A closer examination of Putin's statements bears this out:

"I would like to emphasize again that Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our history, culture, and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us—not only colleagues, friends, and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties. Since time immemorial, the people living in the southwest of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century when a portion of this territory re-joined the Russian state, and after" (Putin, 2022).

Hence, Putin endeavors to garner societal backing by referring to Ukrainians as "brothers of the Russians," aiming to mitigate potential discontent. This statement demonstrates

his awareness of Russian sensitivities and his utilization of language that resonates emotionally. Subsequent to Russia's successful military campaigns, Putin worked to normalize these actions in state media. In 2016, Andrei Kolesnikov underscored: "The Kremlin's mythmaking regarding war relies on three key elements, some of which have clear antecedents in the Soviet-era discourse about war: Moscow's wars are just, defensive, triumphant, and preventive" (Kolesnikov, 2016).

On a particular note, the annexation of Crimea bolstered Russians' trust in Putin, and despite contrary opinions, his argument to safeguard fellow Russians found resonance within the majority. This scenario poses challenges for neoclassical realists in assessing Putin's actions due to Russia's autocratic governance limiting state-society interactions.

Conclusion

This article presents the argument that the conventional framework for understanding conflict management faces inherent challenges when applied to states like Russia. The core of this challenge arises from Russia's deeply rooted historical background as an authoritarian system, which significantly influences its approach to conflict resolution and engagement with Western liberal norms.

Russia's historical trajectory has been defined by centuries of autocratic rule and a distinct political culture that diverges from the principles of Western liberalism. The legacy of czarist rule, followed by the Soviet era, has nurtured a political environment where power centralization and state control have held sway. This environment has contributed to the development of a distinctive national identity and a unique perception of governance, wherein the authority of the state is held in high regard.

In this context, Western liberal norms and approaches to conflict management are greeted with caution and skepticism within Russian society and among its leadership. The emphasis on individual rights, democratic governance, and international cooperation—central to Western conflict management strategies—may be perceived as incompatible with Russia's historical and cultural fabric. The very concept of compromise and negotiation, inherent in conflict management, could clash with Russia's historical inclination to assert its interests through an active foreign policy aimed at safeguarding its perceived spheres of influence.

Hence, this article adopts a multi-method approach, drawing from the perspectives of neoclassical realism, with the specific aim of elucidating Russia's revisionist conflict management policy. The primary focus is directed towards shedding light on the intricate events that transpired in Ukraine during the year 2022.

The choice of a multi-method approach arises from the understanding that comprehending Russia's behavior necessitates a nuanced analysis that takes into account both domestic political dynamics and international factors. Neoclassical realism, as a theoretical framework, recognizes the interplay between a state's domestic structures and its

responses to external pressures. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of how historical authoritarianism, alongside the cautious attitude towards Western liberal norms, shapes Russia's approach to conflicts and international relations.

Furthermore, the complex interplay of unit-level and state-level explanations also plays a pivotal role in shaping Russia's approach to conflict management. The country's history of external invasions and perceived encroachments by Western powers has contributed to a defensive stance in foreign policy. This defensive posture, coupled with a determination to regain and protect its strategic interests, can prompt Russia to adopt a more revisionist foreign policy stance. This further complicates the application of conventional conflict management paradigms.

Understanding conflict management in the context of states like Russia requires a comprehensive analysis of its intricate foreign policy factors. The deeply ingrained authoritarian legacy, combined with a cautious attitude toward Western liberal norms, shapes Russia's distinctive approach to conflicts and international relations. Recognizing these intricacies is crucial for devising effective strategies that acknowledge and operate within Russia's unique context while striving for peaceful resolutions and international cooperation.

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