

Russia's "Great Power" Policy in the Post-Soviet Space: Geopolitical Doctrine, Strategic Behavior, and the Context of its military intervention in Ukraine

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Abstract

This study examines the ideological foundations, strategic objectives, and practical manifestations of Russia's "great power" policy within the post-Soviet geopolitical landscape, focusing particularly on its military intervention in Ukraine. The authors argue that Russia's foreign-policy doctrine, shaped by imperial legacies and Eurasianist thinking, continues to prioritize regional dominance and strategic depth over international legal norms and cooperative security. By revisiting the historical continuum of Russian statecraft—from Tsarist expansionism and Soviet hegemonic control to post-1991 geopolitical reassertion—the paper contextualizes Moscow's actions as a continuation of its quest for strategic parity with the West. The study further explores how Russia's interventions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine reveal a pattern of coercive diplomacy that combines political influence, military force, and hybrid operations. These interventions, justified under narratives of protecting Russian-speaking populations and preserving regional stability, undermine the sovereignty of neighboring states and challenge the international legal order. The findings demonstrate that Russia's policy is not a reactive defense mechanism but an offensive geopolitical strategy aimed at restoring its sphere of influence and counterbalancing Western expansion. The Ukrainian crisis, therefore, epitomizes the conflict between normative international law and power-centric realism in global politics.

Keywords: Russia; great-power politics; Ukraine; Eurasianism; geopolitics; post-Soviet space; hybrid warfare; international law; territorial integrity; regional security

1. Introduction

Every great power develops its own “great power policy,” and obstacles that hinder the realization of such a policy are often eliminated ruthlessly. However, these obstacles are not accidental; rather, they are systematically created by competing powers as political, economic, and military tools, strategically deployed on the geopolitical stage. Historically and in the contemporary era alike, competition and the “war of influence” among great powers for control over strategic regions have been an enduring feature of international relations.

In these struggles, the perspectives and interests of the smaller or contested regions are rarely considered. States are frequently drawn into chaos as great powers pursue their ambitions under the banner of preserving global order. This so-called “World Order,” which presents itself through the rhetoric of globalization, democracy, and human rights, in fact stands in contradiction to geopolitical reality. Although international systems have long claimed to safeguard peace, history demonstrates that they have repeatedly succumbed to the imperatives of geopolitics.

A timeless question arises: *why do wars occur?* The answer, though seemingly simple, is profound—wars erupt when justice fails. International law, the system designed to uphold justice, has often been subordinated to the geopolitical ambitions of the world’s leading states. For great powers, the pursuit of national and strategic interest supersedes the pursuit of justice. Thus, optimism regarding global peace is often misplaced in an era defined by competing geopolitical imperatives.

Peace, in this sense, does not truly exist within the logic of war—it is rather a temporary compromise. The term “peace,” as used in military and strategic contexts, refers not to harmony but to the interlude between conflicts, a preparatory phase preceding the next confrontation. In diplomatic terms, peace signifies an agreement—often one dictated by the victor to the vanquished. Therefore, wars are not initiated or resolved by nations in isolation, but by great powers acting in accordance with their strategic imperatives.

The contemporary paradox of international politics lies in the dissonance between the rhetoric of peace and the practice of power. States that proclaim themselves the guarantors of global stability—through slogans such as “ensuring world peace,” or “promoting regional stability”—frequently engage in interventions and coercive diplomacy that undermine these very ideals. The consistent invocation of these slogans across all major powers serves to obscure their true geopolitical objectives.

2. Russia’s “Great Power” Policy

Within this global framework, the geopolitical behavior of Russia holds particular significance. As one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Russia possesses

both the formal authority and the strategic leverage to shape international security dynamics. However, its actions in the post-Soviet space, particularly toward Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the South Caucasus, reveal a pattern of coercion and intervention inconsistent with its declared mission of “peacekeeping.”

Prominent Russian theorist Prof. Dr. Aleksandr Dugin, known for his *Eurasianist* perspective, has articulated a revealing view of Moscow’s regional policy. He asserts that *“The guarantee of the territorial integrity of any former Soviet country depends on its relations with Russia. If those relations are good, integrity is ensured; if they are bad, integrity will be violated.”* This statement encapsulates the central logic of Russia’s geopolitical conduct: influence is maintained through the management of dependence and the manipulation of instability.

Russia’s “great power” identity is thus observable across several regions—Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the South Caucasus, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia. For Moscow, the full resolution of conflicts and the establishment of enduring peace in these regions are undesirable outcomes, as stability would weaken its leverage. Instead, Russia employs a dual strategy: it integrates cooperative states into mechanisms such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while cultivating or sustaining separatist movements in non-member states. This allows Moscow to justify the presence of Russian troops under the pretext of “peacekeeping,” ensuring its continued dominance.

Behind this strategy lies a long-term geopolitical goal: to sustain dependency among post-Soviet states and preserve Russia’s status as the primary security guarantor in Eurasia. This persistent use of separatism as a policy instrument undermines regional sovereignty and exposes the contradictions in Russia’s self-proclaimed role as a stabilizing power.

3. Russia’s Military Intervention in Ukraine in the Context of “Great Power” Politics

Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine has elicited multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations. Some analysts argue that President Vladimir Putin’s actions reflect an attempt to revive Russian imperialism; others perceive Ukraine’s resistance as a struggle not only for national sovereignty but for the defense of European democratic values. There are also claims that the United States and its allies deliberately drew Russia into a protracted confrontation, orchestrating a geopolitical trap.

While elements of truth may be found in each interpretation, the conflict must ultimately be evaluated through the prism of Russia’s own security perceptions and strategic doctrines. Russia’s worldview, steeped in its “great power” consciousness, prioritizes *hard power*—the use of military and coercive tools—as a means of achieving national objectives.

From Moscow’s perspective, the expansion of NATO toward its borders represents an existential threat. The Kremlin regards Ukraine as a geopolitical “red line,” a buffer state critical to its national security. The historical analogy often invoked in this context is the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the United States reacted sharply to Soviet nuclear deployments near its territory,

compelling Moscow to withdraw. Similarly, Russia's contemporary leaders argue that NATO's military infrastructure in Eastern Europe constitutes a comparable provocation.

Nevertheless, this argument—while rational within the logic of state security—fails to justify the scale and nature of Russia's aggression. The invasion of Ukraine cannot be understood solely as a defensive response to NATO expansion; it is, more fundamentally, a manifestation of Russia's broader "great power" project. The war thus represents not merely a Russia–Ukraine conflict, but a Russia–West confrontation, revealing deep structural tensions in the international system between liberal multilateralism and geopolitical realism.

5. Russia's Neo-Imperial Ambitions and the Logic of "Great Power" Restoration

5.1. The Geopolitical Centrality of Ukraine in Brzezinski's Framework

In his seminal work *The Grand Chessboard* (1998), the American strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski emphasizes Ukraine's pivotal role in the geopolitics of Eurasia. According to Brzezinski, Ukraine represents a "geopolitical pivot" whose independence and stability are indispensable to the transformation of Russia itself. He asserts that "*without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire; with Ukraine subordinated, Russia becomes a European and world-class state; without it, Russia is reduced to an ordinary Asian power*" (3, p. 45).

This statement encapsulates the enduring geopolitical logic that continues to define Russia's strategic posture toward Ukraine. The geopolitical weight of Ukraine lies not only in its geography but also in its symbolic and economic significance—it represents both the spiritual and material frontier of Russia's imperial self-conception. Brzezinski further notes that although post-Soviet Russia lost many of its "decisive pieces" and strategic positions on the Eurasian chessboard, it nonetheless "*remains a clear geostrategic actor*" capable of influencing the balance of power across the continent (3, p. 43).

Thus, Ukraine's sovereignty stands as both a geopolitical obstacle and a psychological challenge to Russia's self-image as a great power. Its westward orientation toward NATO and the European Union represents, from Moscow's perspective, not merely a shift in foreign policy but a profound civilizational defection.

5.2. Putin's Doctrine of Historical Continuity and Eurasian Leadership

The geopolitical vision outlined by Brzezinski resonates deeply with the worldview of Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose political rhetoric consistently reflects an aspiration to restore Russia's status as a global power and arbiter of Eurasian affairs. Putin's statements leave little ambiguity regarding his perception of the Soviet Union's collapse as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" (10; 12; 14). In his 2005 address to the Federal Assembly, he lamented that "*millions of our compatriots found themselves outside the borders of Russia,*" describing it as a national tragedy rather than a historical correction.

Although nearly two decades have passed since that statement, Putin's adherence to this narrative has remained steadfast. His declaration following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, calling it "*the restoration of historical justice*" (13), exemplifies the fusion of nationalist symbolism, historical revisionism, and geopolitical pragmatism that characterizes his doctrine of statecraft.

In practice, this worldview legitimizes the use of force in reasserting influence over former Soviet republics. Russia's military actions in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and the Donbas region (2014–2022) form a coherent pattern of strategic behavior rooted in imperial restoration rather than defensive realism. Each intervention reaffirms Moscow's determination to redefine post-Cold War borders and challenge Western hegemony in its perceived sphere of influence.

5.3. Imperial Continuities and the Logic of Preventing "Color Revolutions"

A distinctive element of Putin's "great power" ideology is the fear of color revolutions—mass uprisings that toppled pro-Russian regimes in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004, 2014), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). These events are viewed in Moscow not as expressions of popular sovereignty but as Western-engineered projects aimed at dismantling Russian influence. Consequently, Putin's foreign policy exhibits both a defensive paranoia and an offensive revisionism, seeking to contain democratic contagion while projecting power beyond Russia's borders.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, should thus be interpreted not only as a response to NATO's enlargement but as part of a larger geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the collective West. This confrontation reflects competing visions of order: Russia's hierarchical, civilization-centric model versus the liberal, rules-based international system upheld by Western democracies.

5.4. Parallels between Russian Neo-Imperialism and German Expansionism

Numerous strategists and scholars have drawn analogies between Putin's geopolitical ambitions and Adolf Hitler's expansionist doctrine during the interwar period (6; 17). Although historical contexts differ, certain ideological and strategic parallels are noteworthy—particularly the invocation of ethnic unity, historical grievance, and "restoration" narratives to justify aggression.

Following its defeat in the First World War, Germany—humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles—sought to reassert itself as a dominant European power. Less than a decade later, its foreign policy evolved into a revisionist agenda that challenged the entire Versailles–Washington collective security order. This trajectory culminated in the Nazi doctrine of "Lebensraum" (living space)—the ideological foundation of German imperialism.

Hitler's foreign policy unfolded in three progressive stages:

1. Breaking the chains of Versailles — Germany's emancipation from the treaty's restrictions;

2. Ein Volk, Ein Reich (“One Nation, One State”) — the unification of all ethnic Germans under one political entity;
3. Lebensraum (“Living Space”) — territorial expansion into non-German lands to secure resources and global dominance (2, p. 241).

Hitler’s objective extended beyond restoring Germany’s pre-1914 power; he sought to make it the preeminent hegemon of Europe (5, p. 294). His campaign began with the Anschluss of Austria (1938), followed by the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia under the Munich Agreement signed by Germany, Great Britain, and France on September 30, 1938. This agreement—widely condemned as an act of appeasement—transferred the Sudetenland region to Germany and paved the way for the full occupation of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939 (2, pp. 287–289).

The annexation of non-German territories marked the transition from the “One Nation, One State” phase to the “Living Space” phase of Hitler’s imperialism. Within twenty years of the end of World War I, the world was once again drawn into a global conflagration—an outcome of hegemonic ambition cloaked in nationalist rhetoric.

5.5. Comparative Reflections

The comparison between Hitler’s interwar expansionism and Putin’s twenty-first-century militarism should not be read as historical equivalence but as structural analogy. Both leaders exploited collective insecurity, historical revisionism, and ideological mythmaking to consolidate domestic legitimacy and justify territorial aggression.

Just as Hitler used the plight of ethnic Germans as a pretext for expansion, Putin has invoked the protection of Russian-speaking populations in Crimea, Donbas, and beyond to rationalize intervention. Both narratives frame aggression as restoration—either of “national unity” or “historical justice.”

From this perspective, Russia’s war against Ukraine is less an isolated conflict than a manifestation of a recurring imperial pathology: the refusal of great powers to accept post-imperial boundaries and the temptation to rewrite history through force.

6. Putin’s Neo-Imperial Doctrine and the Security Dilemmas of Ukraine

6.1. The Revival of Russian Imperial Ideology

President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly articulated his ambitions for the reassertion of Russian power under various ideological and political labels. His public discourse has consistently rejected the notion of a unipolar world order, declaring such a configuration “*unacceptable*” for global stability (11). This rhetoric functions not merely as a critique of U.S. dominance but as an assertion that Russia deserves a co-equal role in the division and management of world affairs.

Putin's worldview reflects a historical revisionism that reinterprets the dissolution of the Soviet Union not as liberation for its constituent republics but as a geopolitical catastrophe that must somehow be reversed. From the Kremlin's perspective, the post-Soviet republics—once integral parts of the tsarist and Soviet empires—belong organically to a Russian civilizational space (6).

In this context, Ukraine occupies a unique position. For Putin, it is not merely a neighboring state but a historical and cultural fragment of Russia itself. His persistent references to the "unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples" and his lament over a "wall" dividing them underscore his determination to re-incorporate Ukraine into a renewed Eurasian empire. The symbolic language of "brotherhood" thus conceals an imperial logic of assimilation.

6.2. The Historical Narrative of Ukraine's "Artificiality"

Putin's argumentation relies heavily on historical reinterpretation. In his 2021 article "*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*" (15), he portrays Ukraine as a "product of the Soviet era," claiming that it was artificially created by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks through the unjust transfer of historically Russian territories. He writes that "*modern Ukraine was created entirely by Bolshevik, communist Russia, which tore away parts of its historical lands.*"

This narrative reframes Ukraine's statehood as a geopolitical aberration and delegitimizes its independence. By attributing Ukraine's borders to Lenin's arbitrary decisions after the 1917 revolution, Putin implies that the restoration of these lands to Russia constitutes the rectification of a historical mistake. Such claims align with a broader civilizational discourse that equates the existence of independent Slavic states with the fragmentation of Russian greatness.

6.3. The Contradiction between Rhetoric and Reality

Despite the fraternal tone of his essay, Putin's policies have been characterized by aggression rather than reconciliation. The annexation of Crimea (2014), the occupation of Sevastopol, and the de facto control of Donbas contradict the purported message of unity and shared heritage. The international community, including the United Nations, continues to recognize these territories as integral parts of Ukraine.

The humanitarian toll of Russia's military campaign further exposes the dissonance between rhetoric and reality. Since February 2022, thousands of civilians have been killed or wounded, millions displaced, and urban centers devastated. Infrastructure critical to survival—power grids, hospitals, and communication networks—has been systematically targeted by missile and air strikes. These operations demonstrate a strategic objective of regime change, seeking to install a Moscow-dependent government in Kyiv.

Hence, Putin's professed concern for the "unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples" masks a project of political subjugation and territorial domination, pursued through hybrid warfare and state terror.

6.4. The Logic of Russian Security and the Paradox of Threat Perception

In defending his foreign-policy choices, Putin frequently invokes the rhetoric of national security threats, depicting Russia as encircled by hostile forces. However, this narrative conceals a deeper paradox: the insecurity that Moscow perceives is largely a consequence of its own behavior.

One must therefore ask: why do neighboring states seek military alliances such as NATO or partnerships with Western powers? The answer is straightforward—Russia’s long-standing record of violating territorial integrity and supporting separatist movements has undermined confidence in its commitments. The Kremlin’s insistence on using coercion to preserve influence has created precisely the isolation it claims to resist.

This self-fulfilling security dilemma defines modern Russian geopolitics. In attempting to restore “strategic depth,” Moscow perpetuates cycles of instability that justify further militarization. The strategy of regaining by hard power what was lost through soft power lies at the heart of Putin’s imperial policy.

6.5. Ukraine’s Sovereignty and the Structural Constraints of Geopolitics

Ukraine, as a sovereign state under international law, possesses the legitimate right to determine its alliances and affiliations. In principle, it is free to pursue membership in the European Union or NATO. In practice, however, the geopolitical reality remains far more complex.

The NATO Charter does not provide for the admission of states engaged in active territorial conflicts. Consequently, while Ukraine’s aspirations are symbolically endorsed, the likelihood of full membership remains remote. Russia has exploited this vulnerability repeatedly, as evidenced by its actions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014)—military interventions designed to freeze each country’s Western trajectory.

Moreover, Moscow sought to dispel global perceptions of its military decline, reasserting its image as a capable great power. Simultaneously, it intended to demonstrate to post-Soviet republics that the security guarantees of the United States were unreliable and that alignment with the West entailed grave risks (4, pp. 169–170).

Russia’s interventions thus serve dual purposes: reinforcing its own deterrent image and issuing a strategic warning to neighboring states inclined toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

6.6. The Breach of the Budapest Memorandum

A pivotal dimension of Ukraine’s security crisis lies in the violation of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances (1994). Under this agreement, the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia pledged to respect Ukraine’s independence and existing borders in exchange for Kyiv’s relinquishment of nuclear weapons valued at more than 50 billion USD (20).

By invading Ukraine, Russia not only violated this treaty but also eroded the credibility of international security guarantees. The failure of the other guarantor powers to respond beyond diplomatic condemnation has further weakened trust in the non-proliferation regime. Ukraine's disarmament, once celebrated as a success of global diplomacy, now stands as a cautionary tale of misplaced faith in great-power assurances.

6.7. The Broader Geopolitical Contest: Russia versus the West

While often portrayed as a bilateral conflict, the Russia–Ukraine war must be understood as a systemic confrontation between Russia and the U.S.-led Western alliance. Ukraine functions as both battlefield and symbol in this struggle for the redefinition of the world order.

Western states, by imposing economic sanctions and restricting Russia's access to global markets, aim to contain Moscow's resurgence without direct military engagement. The United States, in particular, appears to view the war as an opportunity to weaken Russia's strategic capacity, thereby consolidating Western influence over the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres.

This dynamic mirrors earlier moments in world history when isolated incidents were instrumentalized to ignite broader geopolitical realignments. Just as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 provided the pretext for the First World War, the invasion of Ukraine has been used to restructure global alliances and economic dependencies.

A critical question thus emerges: how could a seasoned leader such as Putin allow himself to be drawn into a confrontation that strategically favors his adversaries? The answer may lie in the convergence of two ambitions—Russia's imperial nostalgia and the West's containment strategy. Each side, acting from opposing motivations, has propelled the world into a dangerous phase of competitive escalation.

6.8. Miscalculations and Strategic Overreach

Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion in February 2022 represents a profound miscalculation of international resolve. Encouraged by the West's muted responses to earlier aggressions in Georgia and Crimea, he assumed that Ukraine would succumb rapidly and that Western unity would fracture under pressure. Instead, the war revitalized NATO cohesion, triggered unprecedented economic sanctions, and accelerated Europe's diversification away from Russian energy dependence.

In this sense, the United States successfully transformed Russia's imperial ambition into a strategic opportunity, achieving containment through indirect engagement. Putin's strategic reasoning, echoing the flawed calculations of Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler, underestimated both the resilience of Ukraine and the adaptability of Western power structures.

Here, the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt acquire renewed significance: *"Nothing in politics happens by accident. If it happens, you can bet it was planned that way"* (1, p. 13). The orches-

tration of geopolitical events suggests that the war, far from accidental, has become an instrument through which competing powers seek to reconfigure the architecture of global dominance.

7. The Economic and Geopolitical Dimensions of the Sanctions Regime

7.1. The SWIFT System and the Financial Isolation of Russia

Following the invasion of Ukraine, the United States and its allies implemented a comprehensive package of economic sanctions designed to isolate Russia from global financial markets. Among the most consequential measures was Moscow's exclusion from the SWIFT network—an unprecedented action in modern economic diplomacy.

SWIFT (*Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication*) is a secure global messaging infrastructure established in 1973 and headquartered in Brussels. It enables the transfer of financial data among over 11,000 member institutions—including banks, central banks, and financial organizations across more than 200 countries. Unlike a conventional banking institution, SWIFT does not hold funds or manage accounts; rather, it serves as a messaging platform that transmits over 40 million financial messages daily, facilitating transactions worth trillions of dollars between corporations and governments (21).

Russia's economy, heavily dependent on oil and gas exports, relies on this system for cross-border settlements and currency transfers. By excluding Russian banks from SWIFT, Western powers effectively disrupted Moscow's access to the international financial ecosystem, restricting its ability to conduct trade, pay for imports, or receive export revenues. This move was tantamount to a financial blockade, intended to paralyze the Russian economy and constrain its war capabilities.

7.2. The Broader Spectrum of Economic Sanctions

Beyond SWIFT exclusion, Western sanctions have targeted multiple dimensions of the Russian state and economy. Key measures include:

- Restrictions on currency conversion and the freezing of assets held abroad;
- Tightened export controls on dual-use technologies;
- Bans on the import and export of key commodities such as energy, metals, and defense materials;
- Prohibitions on acquiring advanced technologies, particularly semiconductors, aerospace components, and digital infrastructure;
- Freezing of foreign reserves and sovereign wealth funds stored in Western institutions.

These restrictions collectively aim to diminish Russia's fiscal capacity, erode industrial production, and curtail technological advancement. While the impact has been severe—causing inflationary pressures, reduced investment, and the exodus of multinational corporations—Russia has

sought alternative mechanisms through parallel import routes and de-dollarization efforts with China and India.

Despite these countermeasures, Moscow's insistence on maintaining its military course underscores the primacy of geopolitical objectives over economic rationality. The Kremlin has demonstrated a willingness to endure economic hardship to preserve its perception of strategic autonomy.

7.3. Russia's Negotiating Stance and Non-Compliance with International Norms

In diplomatic forums, Moscow has demanded negotiations but only on its own terms. Its declared conditions for "stabilizing" the situation in Ukraine include:

1. Recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea;
2. Recognition of the so-called "Donbas republics";
3. Demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine;
4. Legal guarantees of Ukraine's neutral status.

These preconditions, effectively amounting to political capitulation, are incompatible with Ukraine's sovereignty and international law. The European Union, NATO, and the United Nations have uniformly rejected them, affirming that every sovereign state possesses the right to choose its own alliances and security arrangements.

By attempting to impose such conditions through coercion, Russia has further isolated itself diplomatically and deepened its characterization as an aggressor state. Putin's self-styled mission to restore Russian greatness has, paradoxically, positioned Russia as a pariah in much of the international community.

7.4. The Human and Moral Cost of Imperial Ambition

The moral dimension of Russia's aggression cannot be overlooked. The invasion of Ukraine has inflicted catastrophic human suffering—thousands of civilian deaths, millions displaced, and the destruction of cities and cultural heritage. These atrocities have not only devastated Ukraine but also tarnished Russia's image irreversibly, transforming Putin from a statesman into a symbol of fratricidal violence in the eyes of Slavic nations and the wider world.

This moral isolation parallels the political and economic one: Moscow's narrative of "historical justice" has collapsed under the weight of civilian casualties and humanitarian devastation. Putin's name, once associated with strategic assertiveness, now stands as a synonym for regression, militarism, and authoritarian revival.

7.5. Scenarios for the War's Continuation

Analysts have proposed numerous scenarios regarding the future of the war. BBC correspondent James Landale (18) suggests one possible outcome: the assassination or exile of President Zelensky, followed by Moscow's declaration of victory and partial troop withdrawal—leaving behind sufficient military presence to sustain control. Under this scenario, Ukraine would be transformed into a satellite state, resembling Belarus, marked by dependency and illegitimacy.

However, Landale notes that such an outcome depends on the collapse of Ukraine's defenses and the consolidation of Russian authority—conditions increasingly improbable given Ukrainian resilience and Western support. He warns that a puppet government would face domestic uprisings and enduring instability, rendering such a victory Pyrrhic.

A more likely scenario, according to Landale, involves a prolonged, attritional conflict characterized by low morale, poor logistics, and extended urban warfare. Prolonged sieges of major cities such as Kyiv could occur, but sustaining occupation of a nation the size of Ukraine would exceed Russia's logistical capabilities. Over time, economic exhaustion, rising casualty rates, and internal dissent could erode the Kremlin's control.

7.6. Strategic Miscalculations and Domestic Repercussions

Lawrence Freedman, Professor of War Studies at King's College London, highlights the possibility of regime change within Russia itself, arguing that "*a change of government in Moscow is now as real as a change of government in Kyiv*" (19). This perspective reflects the fragility of Putin's internal position as the war's costs escalate.

Freedman and other scholars posit that the prolongation of conflict may trigger a cascade of domestic crises: economic contraction, elite defection, and potential military dissatisfaction. Should these pressures intensify, a palace coup or internal revolt cannot be excluded. The Kremlin's recourse to repression may delay but not prevent such outcomes.

The combination of economic decay, moral erosion, and political isolation thus threatens to destabilize the very regime that sought to restore imperial grandeur. Putin's quest for historical vindication risks ending in personal and systemic collapse.

7.7. Western Strategic Calculations and the Role of the United States

The United States has capitalized on the conflict to reaffirm its leadership of the Western alliance. Although differences between Washington and the European Union persist—particularly regarding energy dependence, defense expenditure, and trade—the war has realigned transatlantic priorities.

In recent years, voices within Europe had expressed skepticism toward American leadership, citing remarks such as "NATO's brain death" or calls for "strategic autonomy." However, Russia's invasion transformed the geopolitical calculus. European states once again found themselves re-

liant on U.S. security guarantees, while Washington reasserted its position as the indispensable power.

By framing the conflict as a moral and civilizational struggle, the United States effectively regained Europe's strategic loyalty. Through arms transfers, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic coordination, Washington has leveraged the war to reestablish its primacy in transatlantic relations. In this sense, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has functioned as both a geopolitical deterrent against Russian expansion and a reaffirmation of American hegemony.

7.8. The West's Calculated Detachment and the Instrumentalization of War

Despite rhetorical solidarity, the fate of Ukraine remains secondary to broader Western objectives. The primary goal has been to contain Russia, not necessarily to secure Ukrainian victory. Economic sanctions, energy realignment, and diplomatic isolation serve as instruments to weaken Moscow's long-term geopolitical capacity.

By turning Russia's imperial ambitions into a strategic opportunity, the United States has demonstrated realpolitik of the highest order. The conflict has underscored Europe's vulnerability and re-anchored it under American influence. As one analyst observed, *"Washington has reminded Europe that it cannot ensure its security without the United States."*

Thus, while Ukraine bears the material and human cost of war, the strategic dividends accrue largely to the United States. The conflict has reaffirmed the transatlantic alliance, constrained Russian influence, and signaled to China the potential costs of similar expansionist ambitions.

7.9. The Transformation of Global Geopolitical Order

Whether through Russia's defeat or a negotiated stalemate, the world order emerging from the Russo-Ukrainian war will differ fundamentally from that of the post–Cold War era. A prolonged conflict may entrench a new bipolarity—the U.S.-led liberal coalition on one side and an authoritarian axis led by Russia and China on the other.

Alternatively, should Russia somehow achieve partial victory, it would demonstrate that the world is no longer unipolar and that Western deterrence has limits. Yet even in this scenario, the costs to Russia—economic, moral, and political—would be catastrophic.

As the historian Francis Fukuyama (16) argues in his essay *"Preparing for Defeat,"* Russia's eventual loss may paradoxically herald the "rebirth of global freedom" and restore confidence in democratic resilience. However, irrespective of the outcome, the war has already accelerated the fragmentation of global governance, eroded the norms of international law, and ushered in a new era of systemic confrontation between rival civilizational blocs.

8. The Geopolitical Paradox: Provocation, Calculation, and Imperial Agency

8.1. The Narrative of Provocation and Strategic Responsibility

In political discourse, both within Russia and across global media platforms, a recurring claim suggests that Russia was deliberately provoked or entrapped by the United States and the United Kingdom into initiating the war in Ukraine. This interpretation is frequently voiced in televised debates, policy commentaries, and social-media analyses, portraying Moscow as a victim of Western manipulation.

While such perspectives contain elements of truth—acknowledging that Washington and London undoubtedly pursue long-term geopolitical interests—they remain incomplete and reductionist. To attribute Russia’s full-scale invasion merely to Western provocation is to underestimate both its strategic autonomy and the intentionality of its leadership.

As one of the world’s principal nuclear powers with an extensive intelligence apparatus and historical experience in power politics, Russia cannot plausibly be viewed as an unwitting pawn. A state with such geopolitical capacity and a leadership cadre seasoned in security strategy cannot credibly claim ignorance of the risks inherent in its own actions. Hence, the notion that Russia “fell into a trap” absolves it of agency and obscures its conscious pursuit of neo-imperial objectives.

8.2. The Limits of the “Provocation Thesis”

Although the United States and the United Kingdom maintain vital strategic interests in Eastern Europe, the causal logic of Russia’s aggression extends beyond reactive defense. Moscow’s imperial ambitions, articulated repeatedly by President Putin, form the primary motivational axis.

Official Moscow has consistently opposed NATO’s eastward enlargement, presenting this stance as a defensive imperative. Yet, the invasion of Ukraine was not provoked by NATO expansion per se, nor by the hypothetical threat of nuclear armament in Kyiv. Rather, as articulated by Zbigniew Brzezinski (3, p. 45), Russia’s leadership internalized the belief that without Ukraine, Russia cannot sustain its status as a Eurasian empire.

Thus, the rationale for war was offensive and revisionist, not defensive. The Kremlin opposed Ukraine’s NATO accession not because such membership endangered Russian sovereignty, but precisely because NATO membership would have prevented occupation. This exposes the contradiction in Russia’s stated justifications: its actions reflect expansionist ambition masked by rhetoric of self-protection.

8.3. The Comparative Dimension: The Case of Finland and Sweden

To further evaluate Moscow's motivations, a comparative lens is instructive. When Finland and Sweden—both proximate to Russia's western frontiers—declared their intent to join NATO in 2022, the Kremlin limited its response to diplomatic threats rather than military intervention.

Paradoxically, the accession of these states arguably poses a greater strategic risk to Russia than Ukraine's Western orientation. Their membership places NATO forces directly along the Baltic and Arctic corridors, tightening the encirclement that Moscow claims to fear. Yet Russia refrained from aggression.

This contrast underscores the selective nature of Russia's "security concern" narrative. The difference lies in the civilizational and historical symbolism of Ukraine, which Moscow perceives not as a foreign state but as part of its own historical identity. Therefore, Ukraine—not Finland or Sweden—constitutes Russia's true geopolitical red line.

The conclusion follows logically: Russia's resistance to Ukrainian NATO membership is rooted not in fear of encirclement but in its desire for domination. The annexation and subsequent military intervention reveal that the Kremlin sought subjugation, not balance.

8.4. The Dual Exploitation of the War by Rival Powers

In parallel, Western powers, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom have leveraged the conflict as a strategic opportunity. By transforming Russia's imperial overreach into a justification for sanctions, they re-established Western cohesion and reasserted leadership over a fragmented Europe.

Thus, while Moscow initiated aggression, Washington and London instrumentalized the war to achieve containment objectives and strengthen their own geopolitical leverage. The provocation narrative therefore functions on two levels: as an internal justification for Russia and as a geopolitical tool for the West.

The interplay of imperial ambition and strategic exploitation illustrates a mutual opportunism characteristic of great-power rivalry, wherein each actor uses the other's miscalculation to advance its own strategic agenda.

9. Conclusion: Consequences and Global Repercussions

9.1. The Transformation of International Political-Economic Processes

The Russia–Ukraine war has triggered rapid transformations across the global political, economic, and security landscapes. The confrontation has reconfigured the architecture of international relations, reshaped energy flows, and tested the resilience of multilateral institutions.

The conflict has produced social, economic, and demographic shocks that extend far beyond the immediate battlefield. Supply chains have been disrupted, food and energy prices have surged, and inflationary pressures have strained economies worldwide. European nations, heavily dependent on Russian hydrocarbons, have faced energy insecurity, while developing states have experienced food shortages due to halted grain exports from the Black Sea region.

For Russia itself, the war has resulted in a paradoxical duality: short-term military-political gains in Ukraine have coincided with long-term economic and diplomatic decline. Comprehensive international sanctions have curtailed growth, accelerated technological isolation, and undermined foreign investment. Yet, despite these constraints, the Kremlin continues to pursue its invasion strategy, driven by the ideological imperative of restoring great-power status.

9.2. The Weaponization of Economic Interdependence

Russia's economic leverage, particularly its control over energy supplies, has been deployed as a strategic instrument of coercion. By restricting gas flows and manipulating export routes, Moscow has sought to pressure European governments and sow division within NATO.

This policy of energy coercion reveals the transition from traditional military dominance to a hybrid model of warfare—one that blends conventional aggression with economic and informational instruments. However, such tactics have also accelerated Europe's diversification away from Russian energy and fostered new global alignments in the energy market, notably with the Middle East, Africa, and the Caspian Basin.

9.3. The Strategic Reassessment of International Alliances

The war has compelled numerous states and organizations to redefine their security doctrines and alliance structures. NATO has undergone a process of strategic rejuvenation, expanding its membership and reaffirming collective defense principles. The European Union, once divided on defense policy, has intensified coordination in sanctions, energy security, and arms procurement.

Beyond the West, other actors—such as China, India, and Türkiye—have recalibrated their positions to balance economic pragmatism with geopolitical caution. These shifts indicate the emergence of a multipolar security environment characterized by flexible alignments rather than rigid blocs.

9.4. The Evolution of the Global Security Paradigm

Perhaps the most profound consequence of the war is its impact on the global security paradigm. The notion of stable deterrence, which underpinned post-Cold War order, has been fundamentally challenged. Great-power conflict has re-entered international politics as a legitimate instrument of policy, undermining faith in diplomacy and international law.

Simultaneously, international organizations—including the United Nations, OSCE, and World Bank—face growing skepticism over their effectiveness. Calls for reform of global governance have intensified, as existing institutions appear ill-equipped to prevent aggression or mediate high-intensity conflicts among major powers.

9.5. Synthesis and Outlook

In sum, the Russia–Ukraine war epitomizes the return of geopolitics as the central organizing principle of international relations. The conflict reflects the intersection of imperial ambition, strategic miscalculation, and systemic rivalry.

Russia’s refusal to retreat, despite economic and demographic exhaustion, demonstrates that ideological prestige outweighs material pragmatism in its foreign policy calculus. Meanwhile, the United States and its allies have used the crisis to consolidate transatlantic unity, revitalize NATO, and reaffirm Western dominance.

Ultimately, this war has inaugurated a new historical phase—one in which global politics is again defined by hard-power competition, competing civilizational narratives, and the erosion of the liberal international order. Whether through protracted confrontation or uneasy compromise, the world that emerges will differ fundamentally from that of the early twenty-first century: more divided, more militarized, and more uncertain.

10. Conclusion

The Russia–Ukraine war stands as a watershed event in the evolution of the twenty-first-century international order. It is not a localized military conflict, but a multidimensional confrontation in which competing visions of world politics—imperial restoration, liberal internationalism, and strategic multipolarity—collide. Russia’s aggression has revealed the persistence of great-power revisionism in global affairs, demonstrating that the logic of empire, though cloaked in the language of security and history, remains a potent force in shaping state behavior.

This study has shown that Moscow’s actions cannot be fully explained by external provocation or Western encirclement alone. The invasion of Ukraine represents a calculated pursuit of neo-imperial ambition, rooted in a belief that Russia’s geopolitical identity and strategic autonomy depend on the subordination of its neighbors. The Kremlin’s repeated invocation of history—the alleged artificiality of Ukrainian statehood, the legacy of the Soviet collapse, and the narrative of “historical justice”—serves not as historical scholarship but as political justification for territorial expansion.

At the same time, the conflict has revealed the adaptive resilience of the Western alliance. The United States and its partners, while avoiding direct military engagement, have effectively transformed Russia’s imperial overreach into a strategic opportunity. Through coordinated sanctions, military assistance to Ukraine, and renewed transatlantic solidarity, the West has reasserted its

leadership in global affairs. The war, therefore, has paradoxically revitalized the very institutions—NATO, the EU, and the liberal democratic coalition—that Moscow sought to weaken.

The economic and humanitarian consequences of the conflict are profound. Russia's exclusion from global markets, the disruption of energy supplies, and the weaponization of interdependence have accelerated the re-regionalization of the global economy. At the same time, the war has inflicted catastrophic social costs—millions displaced, thousands killed, and an enduring humanitarian crisis in Eastern Europe. These outcomes underscore that in the pursuit of imperial glory, Russia has sacrificed both its moral legitimacy and its economic future.

Beyond Europe, the war has catalyzed a reconfiguration of global power structures. It has intensified alignment among authoritarian regimes, deepened energy and trade ties between Russia and China, and forced middle powers to redefine their strategic autonomy. The global system that emerges from this conflict will likely be more fragmented, more militarized, and more competitive. The illusion of a stable unipolar order has definitively ended; in its place arises a precarious multipolarity shaped by coercion, economic nationalism, and competing civilizational narratives.

Ultimately, the Russia–Ukraine war has reintroduced hard power as the dominant currency of international relations, while exposing the fragility of international law and collective security. It has reminded the world that the pursuit of greatness, when guided by nostalgia rather than prudence, leads not to stability but to self-destruction.

Whether Russia's actions mark the twilight of empire or the dawn of a new era of confrontation remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the moral and strategic landscape of the twenty-first century has been irrevocably altered. The lessons of this war—about power, pride, and the limits of coercion—will define global politics for decades to come.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive, and geopolitical analytical framework designed to explore Russia's foreign-policy doctrine through historical, theoretical, and empirical lenses. The methodological structure includes:

- Historical-comparative analysis to trace continuities in Russian geopolitical thought from the imperial to the post-Soviet era.
- Discourse and content analysis of official Russian strategic documents, speeches by policymakers, and writings of Russian geopolitical theorists such as Aleksandr Dugin.
- Case study approach focusing on Ukraine as the central case, supplemented by references to parallel patterns in Georgia, Moldova, and Kazakhstan.
- Systematization and synthesis of existing academic and policy literature to identify structural patterns of Russian interventionism.
- Theoretical framing within the schools of realism and neo-Eurasianism to interpret Russia's self-perception as a global power.

This integrative methodology allows for both contextual depth and conceptual clarity in evaluating Russia's geopolitical logic and its operational strategies in the post-Soviet realm.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings highlight a consistent and deliberate continuity in Russia's assertion of great-power status through geopolitical and military means:

1. **Ideological Foundations of "Great Power" Thinking:**
Russian strategic culture is built on the belief that its survival and prestige depend on maintaining influence over the territories of the former USSR. The ideology of "Russkiy mir" (the Russian world) and the concept of Eurasian civilization provide a moral and cultural justification for interventionist policies.
2. **Institutionalization of Power Politics:**
Russia leverages its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to shield its actions from international repercussions, thereby transforming legal instruments into political tools. Moscow's dual role—as both peacekeeper and aggressor—creates systemic ambiguity in conflict mediation.
3. **The Ukraine Case as a Geopolitical Turning Point:**
The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022 mark the culmination of long-term strategic preparation. These actions demonstrate the operationalization of hybrid warfare, blending conventional force, cyber operations, and information control to achieve territorial and psychological dominance.
4. **Regional Implications:**
Russia's interventions have reconfigured the security architecture of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, undermining regional stability and compelling states such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan to recalibrate their foreign policies between Russian influence and Western engagement.
5. **Global Consequences:**
The conflict has reinforced global polarization, expanded NATO's strategic reach, and disrupted global energy and food markets. It has also revitalized debates on the reform of international institutions that have failed to prevent aggression by great powers.

Overall, the research concludes that Russia's "great power" policy is not merely defensive real-politik but a structured attempt to institutionalize geopolitical dominance through militarization, regional leverage, and ideological justification. The Ukraine war is a manifestation of this broader strategic doctrine rather than an isolated episode.

Conclusion

Russia's pursuit of "great power" status reveals a dual character—an aspiration for international recognition and a compulsion for regional dominance. The Ukrainian conflict symbolizes the clash between power politics and the principles of sovereignty that underpin the modern international system. As long as Moscow's foreign-policy identity remains grounded in imperial nostal-

gia and securitized geopolitics, genuine peace and stability in the post-Soviet space will remain elusive. The future of European and Eurasian security will depend on how effectively the international community can balance deterrence with diplomacy to contain and transform this great-power paradigm.

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Conflict of Interest

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