

War and Expansion: Russian Foreign Policy and Predictions on Its Next Direction

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Abstract

The twenty-first century has been marked by escalating geopolitical instability, with conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan contributing to a broader atmosphere of global uncertainty. Against this backdrop, Russia's foreign policy trajectory has become an increasingly critical subject of analysis. This paper examines Russia's strategic vision and likely future actions by evaluating current geopolitical trends alongside historical patterns of Russian behaviour. This investigation will employ a realist lens to explain the underlying motivations driving Russian foreign policy and its pursuit of geopolitical expansion. The paper will focus on two principal areas: the potential outcomes of the Russia–Ukraine war and their implications for Russia's efforts to counter NATO, and Russia's expanding ambitions in the Arctic, a region of growing strategic and economic significance. While not exhaustive, this study highlights the central dynamics shaping Russia's long-term geopolitical posture. It concludes with policy recommendations aimed at addressing the challenges posed by Russia's increasingly assertive role on the world stage.

Keywords: Russian Foreign Policy, Imperialism, Arctic Expansion, Policy Recommendations, War

Introduction

The global political development of the 21st century is characterized by risk and danger. There is a war in Europe between Russia and Ukraine that has been active for years now. Recent developments in the Gaza and Palestine conflicts have shown a wave of global protest that have further produced a degree of political instability and a sense of chaos. Civil war in Sudan is further putting pressure on the Middle East and has produced not only a humanitarian crisis but also another choke point of danger and escalation. Humanity is clearly not living through an age of peace, and it's impossible to ignore how Winston Churchill's warning still echoes today. His words, "They have only to repeat the same well-meaning, short-sighted behaviour... to bring about a third convulsion from which none may live to tell the tale." now carry an even heavier weight. Churchill's statement sharpens our awareness of how fragile global stability has become and deepens

the sense of danger looming over the twenty-first century. The purpose of this research paper is to outline the strategic vision and future direction of one of the world's most influential global power players – Russia, through an examination of its foreign policy and long-term development. This paper aims to provide a forward-looking assessment that draws on current geopolitical trends to better understand what Russia may do next on the international stage. The key to understanding the power dynamic and the desire for everlasting growth of Russian foreign influence lays through the lens of realism, which suggests that national interest, power, and state survival are not ideals, but rather the primary drivers behind shaping its political behaviour. This lens will be used to guide a reader to better understand the reasoning behind Russian foreign expansion.

The first section of the investigation will briefly evaluate the potential outcome of the Russia–Ukraine war and consider how this outcome may influence Russia’s efforts to push NATO further from its borders. The second section will examine Arctic security, focusing on the measures Russia is likely to pursue to consolidate its position in a region defined by abundant natural resources, strategic logistical advantages, and emerging geopolitical pressure points. It is important to note that this research paper does not attempt to address every possible dimension of Russian foreign policy. Instead, it concentrates on several key examples grounded in available information and informed by historical patterns of Russian behaviour, which often demonstrate a tendency to repeat themselves. The conclusion will present a set of policy recommendations aimed at mitigating Russia’s increasingly assertive geopolitical posture.

Outcome of the Russia-Ukraine War: Blocking the Path to NATO and Setting an Example

The most recent Russian-Ukrainian war started in February 2022; the conflict has taken hundreds of thousands of lives as well as displaced 3.7 million people within Ukraine and has created 6.7 million refugees internationally, according to the UN refugee agency. The damage that has been done internally to the infrastructure of Ukraine is significant and will be long-lasting. This is not the first time Russian had open conflict with Ukraine; event of 2014 Crimea war has been a shadow that has followed Ukraine into war with Russia in February 2022. In November 2013, the Ukrainian government led by the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich declined to sign a planned Association Agreement with the European Union. This decision sparked large-scale demonstrations in Kyiv, known as the “Euromaidan protests,” which escalated into violent clashes in early 2014. By February, several European foreign ministers intervened to negotiate a compromise that proposed forming a unity

government and holding early elections. Later that month, unidentified armed personnel, later acknowledged to be Russian forces, took control of key sites in Crimea, including the peninsula’s airports, and pro-Russian groups seized the Crimean autonomous parliament. In March 2014, the parliament declared independence and organized a referendum on joining Russia. Russian officials reported that 97.47% of voters supported annexation, but the international community has not recognized the legitimacy of this vote. Following these events, Russia consolidated its control over Crimea and provided support to pro-Russian separatists who seized territory in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine (the Donbas) in 2014, entrenching a conflict that would continue for years. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is a multi-stage process that has been heavily influenced and triggered by Ukraine's desire to be a member of NATO. From a Russian foreign policy perspective, having a bordering country as a member of NATO is jeopardizing its border security due to having a non-ally sharing a border with an opposing global power.

Hans J. Morgenthau, the father of classical realism, argues in *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, that the central driving force behind a state’s actions is its will to maintain power. He emphasizes that this pursuit of power can be implemented through various methods, and he underlines “All political activity, whether domestic or international, can ultimately be distilled into three fundamental dynamics: the pursuit of maintaining power, the expansion of power, or the projection of power.” For Russia, demonstrating power through destruction, fear, or the potential expansion of its dominion is nothing new. Through these methods, it preserves and extends its political reach while simultaneously sending a stark warning to other states. The message is unmistakable: Russia is not afraid to advance its interests against those it perceives as threatening its power. This pattern of behaviour evokes a

sense of *Déjà Vu* in relation to Russian foreign affairs dating back to the late 1990s, when relations between NATO and Ukraine deepened with the 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership and were further strengthened in 2009 through the Declaration to Complement the Charter. Together, these developments reaffirmed NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit commitment that Ukraine would eventually become a member of the Alliance. For Russia, these steps signalled a steady movement of NATO toward its borders, reinforcing long-standing concerns in Moscow about Ukraine's westward trajectory and the strategic implications of potential NATO expansion. As Ukraine's orientation toward the West has deepened over the years, it has become increasingly clear to Moscow that none of the post-Soviet states should be left free to determine their own political trajectory, given the risk that the West could gain additional allies in what Russia regards as the core of its strategic backyard. This, in essence, underscores an imperial mindset that Russia has maintained since the fall of the Soviet Union. From a realist perspective, Russia's refusal to relinquish even an inch of territory it once controlled is a fundamental component of its functioning as a state, as well as a core driver of its political ambitions in foreign affairs. This is further well underlined by Hans J. Morgenthau, in his work *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, the author states, "Imperialism becomes identified with the maintenance of defence and stabilization of an empire already in existence rather than with the dynamic process of acquiring one." For Russia, the empire it inherited is not one it intends to relinquish; consequently, any risk of Western influence encroaching on its borders is viewed as intolerable and fundamentally unacceptable. Unfortunately, history tends to repeat itself, and the lessons that could have been learned from the 2008 Russia-Georgia war were largely overlooked.

Georgia, being a small country with limited media attention and far less NATO support than Ukraine, did not receive the international focus it needed. Yet the events of 2008 were a clear precursor to Russia's later foreign policy decisions toward any state seeking closer ties with the West. By 2008, Georgia's increasingly close relationship with the West had begun to generate serious tension with its much larger northern neighbour - Russia. Following the Bucharest Declaration which signalled that NATO viewed both Georgia and Ukraine as future members, Russia concluded that these two states, given their history as former Soviet republics, were too strategically significant to be permitted entry into the Alliance. Their importance to Moscow was evident in the stark contrast between Russia's reaction to their potential membership and its comparatively muted response to the earlier accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The prospect of NATO's presence directly on Russia's border fundamentally altered the geopolitical stakes, and the seemingly routine discussion of Georgian and Ukrainian membership at Bucharest crossed a threshold that Russian leaders had long warned the West not to approach. From a realist point of view, Moscow's strategy of preventing two former Soviet republics from becoming fully Westernized reflects a logic of self-preservation, rooted in the desire to maintain regional influence and safeguard the power it believes essential to its security. The Russia sought to make an example of both Georgia and later Ukraine, initiating wars with these two states to signal to others and to their own populations that any path toward the West would be bloody and effectively impossible so long as Russia retained the power to obstruct it. In both cases, Russians and Georgians suffered enormously, and the prospects of either country moving closer to NATO have diminished as a result. For Georgia, the desire for NATO membership now triggers painful memories of a war that cost the country 20 percent of its territory. For Ukraine, which remains engulfed in a far larger and ongoing

conflict, the eventual outcome of the war will shape not only its security trajectory but its future path towards westernization.

Judging by Russia's past actions, Ukraine's future appears increasingly uncertain, as the possibility of achieving a decisive military victory is becoming slim. Russia is likely to retain control over the territories it currently occupies, a pattern consistent with its previous behaviour. For Ukraine, the only viable path to long-term survival short of total devastation may ultimately involve negotiating or formally ceding the territories now under Russian control. According to the Association of the United States Army (AUSA), *The Russo-Ukrainian War: A Strategic Assessment Two Years into the Conflict* states that "Russo-Ukrainian War leads to the conclusion that Russia has the upper hand and in 2024, Ukraine has limited prospects for overturning Russian territorial annexations, or dislodging reinforced Russian positions in the occupied regions." This underscores that the most likely outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war will favour Russia, potentially resulting in further territorial annexation similar to what occurred in Crimea in 2014 and in Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the 2008 war in Georgia. The most reasonable option for Ukraine at this stage may be a strategy of hard diplomacy, which could involve relinquishing certain territories to protect its population and economy from further damage and catastrophic outcomes. This is not a decision any leader wishes to make, yet it may be the only path that preserves the possibility for Ukraine to rebuild itself as a functioning state in the future. With this outcome, the potential for Ukraine to join NATO is slim to none, as the Alliance will not place itself in a situation where one of its members is in an active war with a global power. Thus, in the same way that Ukraine may be forced to forfeit territory, it may also be compelled to forfeit its path to NATO membership. If Ukraine continues its resistance to free itself from Russia's grip, the country will suffer not only economically but

also in terms of population loss, leading to even greater devastation. One way or another, Russia intends to make an example of Ukraine, a state that resisted but ultimately succumbed to the overwhelming pressure of Russian imperial power.

Arctic Exploration: Russia's Next Target

The Arctic region is not only a mysterious land covered in ice and snow but also a geopolitical strategic location that promises great potential and resource capabilities to those who manage to capture it first. It is a strategically significant region shaped by intersecting environmental, political, economic, and military dynamics. During the Cold War, it served as a critical arena of competition between the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, Arctic states attempted to maintain the region as a space for cooperation. Yet over the past decade, intensifying strategic rivalry among the U.S, Russia, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has dramatically heightened its geopolitical relevance. Great powers, whether China, the United States, or Russia, are inherently suspicious of one another from a realist point of view. In realism, such distrust is not only expected but rational, because no state can ever be certain that another will not undermine its sovereignty in pursuit of greater power. The safest assumption, therefore, is that other major states may one day become threats. This logic produces a strategic environment in which the best defence is often seen as offence: striking first or gaining dominance over another actor can shift the political balance in favour of the aggressor. This dynamic is sharply articulated by John J. Mearsheimer, an American political scientist and leading realist scholar, who, in a book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, develops the concept of offensive realism. In essence, he argues that great powers seek to maximize their power because, under anarchy, survival can never be guaranteed. In his book, he states "Given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and

tomorrow, great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power.”

Within the logic of offensive realism, the maximization of power becomes essential for both expansion and long-term survival. For Russia, this dynamic extends to the Arctic, where further expansion is viewed as another opportunity to consolidate and enhance its power. Building on this principle, Russia's and the PRC's rapid military modernization outpacing the comparatively slower responses of the United States and NATO has further transformed the Arctic into a focal point of strategic competition. The region has become increasingly defined by security concerns, intensified resource extraction efforts, and the struggle for control over newly accessible maritime routes. Global attention to the region surged in 2009 when the US Geological Survey estimated that the Arctic contains 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and 30 percent of its untapped natural gas reserves. That same year, the U.S. hosted the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting to reaffirm commitments to cooperation. However, Russia's increasingly assertive territorial posture soon shifted the atmosphere from collaboration to competition. This assertiveness was not new; in 2007, Russian submarines famously planted a flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole, symbolically declaring, “The Arctic is Russian.” Russia's pursuit of dominance in the Arctic is best understood as a modern expression of imperial ambition rather than a benign extension of national interests. Its actions echo the rhetoric of Kaiser Wilhelm II's 1901 “A Place in the Sun” speech, in which he declared, “Although we have no such fleet as we should have, we have conquered for ourselves a place in the sun. It will now be my task to see to it that this place in the sun shall remain our undisputed possession.” Russia's contemporary behaviour mirrors this sentiment: it seeks to expand its global influence, secure strategic advantages, and

entrench its control over the region. In doing so, Moscow is not only reviving but surpassing the imperial reach it exercised during the Soviet era, leveraging the Arctic as a platform to project power and reshape the geopolitical landscape of the twenty-first century.

Due to Climate change, the Arctic has been dramatically reshaped, opening areas that were once inaccessible and enabling new economic and strategic activity. Emerging maritime corridors such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Northwest Passage (NWP) are projected to become commercially viable, potentially diverting global shipping away from traditional routes like the Suez Canal. As resource availability increases, states are recalibrating their strategies and intensifying competition over the region's expanding economic and military value. This rivalry has been amplified by accelerating militarization. As stated by John J. Mearsheimer in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, “Great powers aim to maximize the amount of the world's wealth that they control. States care about relative wealth, because economic might is the foundation of military might.” From a realist perspective, access to new forms of resources, positions a state more favourably to accumulate and project power, thereby strengthening its capacity to defend its status quo and pursue additional strategic gains. In this logic, economic expansion and resource acquisition are not merely material advantages, but essential components of a state's long-term survival strategy within an anarchic international system.

Over the past decade, Russia has upgraded its Arctic military infrastructure, deployed advanced missile systems, modernized its submarine fleet, and expanded its fisheries, energy, and mineral extraction capabilities. By 2020, the Russian Ministry of Defence had taken part in rebuilding sixteen ports and nineteen airfields across the Arctic. Many of the upgraded or newly constructed airfields in the Arctic archipelagos are intended solely for

military use. However, at Alykel (an isolated city of Norilsk, Russia) and Anadyr (a town in Russia), the Ministry is expanding existing civilian airports with additional military infrastructure. This further illustrates expansion on arctic and preparation of Russia to have overall control of arctic mission. The desire to be ready is a good sign of active policy development that focuses on militarization, infrastructure development and readiness for new expeditions. A similar pattern is visible along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), where several civilian ports are being modernized to support a broader range of functions. For instance, the port of Dikson (a Russian port town on the Taymyr Peninsula) is set to undergo a major overhaul and become a dual-use facility by 2022, while comparable upgrades to the port infrastructure in Tiksi (a city in Russia) are planned for completion by 2025. Parallel to these developments, the Russian Marine Rescue Service is enlarging its network of search and rescue stations along the Arctic coast and updating its fleet, more than doubling the number of ice-class vessels. Even more ambitious is the renewal of Russia's nuclear-powered icebreaker fleet, which is expected to be almost entirely modernized by the mid-2020s. On the other hand, the United States' recent interest in Greenland is a strong indicator that Washington is paying closer attention to Russia's expanding foreign policy activities in the Arctic. This shift suggests that the U.S. wants to ensure Russia does not continue widening its strategic reach in the region unchecked.

There are two main reasons behind U.S. engagement in the Arctic: a) Like Russia and China, the United States seeks access to the Arctic's natural resources and the strategic advantages offered by newly emerging maritime trade routes near Europe and Russia. b) The United States also aims to prevent Russia from becoming the dominant power in the region. Allowing Russia and increasingly China to shape the Arctic unilaterally would place the U.S. at a strategic disadvantage,

leaving a critical emerging region under the influence of competing global powers. This is well illustrated by document published by U.S. Department of Defense arctic strategy (2024) in which it underlines that "In addition to nuclear, conventional, and special operations threats, Russia seeks to carry out lower-level destabilizing activities in the Arctic against the United States and our Allies, including through Global Positioning System jamming and military flights that are conducted in an unprofessional manner inconsistent with international law and custom." These recent documents highlight a growing emphasis on security and strategic competition, portraying Russia's assertive actions and China's expanding influence in the Arctic as major challenges. This framing once again underscores a counter-policy approach aimed at limiting Russia's ambitions to extend its reach in the region. Given the intensified engagement of major global powers in the Arctic region in recent years, it is evident that Russia's forthcoming foreign-policy initiatives are likely to focus on expanding its presence in the Arctic and consolidating ground-based control in this strategically significant area. This development highlights the adaptability of Russia's policy approach: it is not only a state capable of undertaking military incursions, but also one that actively seeks to exploit emerging opportunities in regions where influence and authority cannot be secured solely through conventional military means.

Policy Mitigation: How to Deal With Russia – Theory and Brief Recommendation

Managing a state that possesses the capability to devastate the world with the push of a button is an extraordinarily complex challenge. Yet, meaningful progress is possible by developing informed recommendations that help policymakers better anticipate and mitigate Russia's strategic behaviour. The following section outlines two policy recommendations. Together, these approaches offer complementary pathways for reducing

risk, improving prediction, and shaping more stable long-term relations with Russia. To pursue these goals effectively, policymakers must first abandon wishful thinking and instead adopt the cold rationalism of realism. Rather than if states will prioritize morality, cooperation, or the stabilizing influence of international institutions, John J. Mearsheimer argues that the international system remains fundamentally competitive and dangerous. As he writes in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, “international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way.” This realist perspective highlights a critical point: strategic judgment becomes compromised when policymakers rely on optimistic assumptions about state behaviour instead of acknowledging the enduring struggle for power and security that shapes Russia’s actions. For the sake of clear policy recommendations, one must abandon wishful thinking and confront reality.

Countering Russian Imperialism

Russia needs to be viewed as a Tsar empire that is led by a war machine of imperialism; it is not an ordinary state, and for sure, it is not acting like one. Russia’s foreign policy follows the notion of imperialism, understood as “The desire of the state to expand its territorial (colonial) possessions, mainly in other parts of the world.” Whether it is expansion toward Ukraine, Georgia, or the Arctic, the idea of imperialism guides Moscow’s foreign policy decision-making. To counter this imperialist expansion, there must be a global counterweight of alliances, whether from NATO, the European Union, or the broader Western community that can limit Russia’s expansionist ambitions. It is also important to undermine the financial gains of the Russian war machine, which operates through a command and conquer approach. This requires creating barriers to trade and enforcing strict sanctions that prevent the rebranding of products and gradually weaken Russia’s economic capacity over time. According to

André Härtel’s and his research “EU Actorness in the Conflict in Ukraine: Between ‘Comprehensive’ Ambitions and the Contradictory Realities of an Enlarged ‘Technical’ Role,” his works shows that, unlike its largely symbolic response to the 2008 Georgia–Russia war, the EU’s post-2014 sanctions against Russia enabled a more coherent political strategy and a more active role in European conflict management. By strengthening its sanctions infrastructure and investing in Ukraine through its mediation efforts, the EU positioned itself as a more capable security actor in the post-Soviet region.

The sanctions do have an effect, and when they are consistently enforced and reinforced with sustained pressure, they can help cultivate an anti-imperialist approach in Russian foreign policy by removing the economic incentives for attacking other states. EU sanctions had a measurable impact on Russia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Following the introduction of these measures, Russia’s GDP growth declined sharply—from 2.3% before the annexation of Crimea to just 0.8% between 2014 and 2015. The second round of EU financial sanctions, implemented in August 2014, delivered the most severe economic blow. These restrictions significantly disrupted Russia’s international trade and financial operations, leading to a notable reduction in capital inflows. This contraction appears to have reinforced Russia’s perception that the EU possessed both the capacity and the willingness to impose further economic harm if necessary. The key to success is a multi-lens strategy led jointly by the EU, NATO, and the United States, an alliance strong enough to generate a credible counterweight to Russia’s imperialist foreign policy. Without a coordinated and collaborative approach, it will be impossible to design and sustain an effective policy framework capable of constraining Russian behaviour.

Why Realism Must Guide Western Strategy Toward Russia?

Russia, as an empire, carries a long and vivid history marked by conquest, imperial ambition, violence, and collapse. Yet history has a habit of repeating itself, and any nation that finds itself confronting Russia must relearn the nature of the adversary it faces on the battlefield. Modern Russia commands significant military power. Its armed forces include roughly 1.32 million active personnel, supported by a navy, an air force, special operations units, and the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet. Understanding the scale and weight of this capability is essential before challenging it in any military or geopolitical arena. This is precisely why policy recommendations aimed at countering Russian influence must be grounded in realism rather than wishful thinking. The theory of realism suggests that states, from a realist perspective, operate in an anarchic international environment where no higher authority can guarantee their security. As a result, they must rely on their own power and capabilities to pursue national interests. Above all, the primary national interest is ensuring the state's survival, protecting its population, political institutions, and territorial boundaries. Building on this reasoning, it becomes evident that Russia is acting primarily to safeguard its own national interests. Consequently, any effort to resist Russian expansion must adopt an equally survival-oriented and rational approach, ensuring that policy responses remain strategic and do not escalate into a protracted or destabilizing conflict.

An effective strategy requires acknowledging Russia's strengths, its historical patterns, and the hard limits of deterrence and confrontation. Only by approaching the problem with clear eyes and sober judgment can one hope to counter its actions and mitigate its impact. A useful way to visualize the dangers involved is to revisit Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, particularly Chapter XVIII, "How Princes Should Keep Faith," in which he writes: "A prince must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect itself

from traps, and the fox cannot defend itself from wolves. "One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves. The central lesson of this chapter is that a leader must know when to act with the strength and decisiveness of a lion, and when to employ the cunning and subtlety of a fox. This logic resonates strongly when considering Russian foreign policy and its aggressive posture. Confronting Russia directly as a single state is difficult, given its power and sheer military capacity. Therefore, the most effective way to manage and de-escalate the situation is through diplomacy grounded in pragmatic solutions that prevent the conflict from expanding.

Concluding Thought

In the modern era, it is essential to address any expanding and aggressive foreign policy with strategies that mitigate risk and prevent the potential outbreak of a third world war. The military capabilities of major powers have grown to unprecedented, mass-destructive levels, making it imperative to preserve stability in a chaotic environment where a single decision could have catastrophic consequences. Diplomacy and a measured, rational approach must therefore guide responses not only to Russia, but to any state that pursues aggressive or predatory policies. Only through restraint, strategic clarity, and sustained diplomatic engagement can the international community reduce the likelihood of escalation and maintain global peace. Within this broader context, it is important to recognize that this research paper has focused specifically on Russian foreign affairs and the likely direction of its future geopolitical behaviour. It has presented several examples of potential foreign-policy expansion, whether through blocking Ukraine's access to NATO and using that outcome as a warning to other neighbouring states, or through Russia's accelerating push into the Arctic as it seeks to secure strategic and economic advantages. These cases illustrate only a portion of the possibilities. With Russia exerting such significant influence on global affairs, it is

crucial to understand that Moscow may pursue additional avenues of expansion that have not yet been fully revealed or publicly articulated. Remaining vigilant, closely monitoring political developments, and maintaining a clear

understanding of Russia's long-term strategic patterns will be essential for crafting informed and effective policy decisions in the years ahead.

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