

THREAT ANALYSIS: APPLYING DIFFERENTIAL SECURITY FRAMEWORKS TO ASSESS RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, United States–Russia relations have oscillated between periods of hostile distrust and cautious cooperation. Russia’s annexation of Crimea, continued threats against Baltic states, and military buildup in recent years has endangered the stability of the European post–Cold War order and caused mounting foreign policy concerns for the United States. It will be useful to consider several theories in security studies that provide frameworks. By doing this, we can document and classify threats and assess potential outcomes and implications. To be explicit, I assume that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has not expanded further, that Vladimir Putin will remain Russia’s leader with high approval ratings, and that tensions will persist over Ukraine and Syria throughout the next five years. Given these assumptions, I will highlight and discuss the balance of power theory, nuclear deterrence, and psychological theories of war.

BALANCE OF POWER THEORY AND NATO

According to the balance of power theory of war presented by Jack Levy in *Theories and Causes of War*, states focus on their position relative to other countries on the international stage in terms of security, power, and wealth (Levy 2011). For context, this model resides within the neorealist school of thought in international relations theory. Within neorealist ideology is the division between defensive and offensive neorealism. The former predicts that decision-makers are satisfied when the state’s territorial integrity is secure while the latter predicts that a state seeks to continuously maximize its relative power to guarantee its survival. Applied to the case of the Russian Federation, the implications of both strains of neorealism can be informative in categorizing President Vladimir Putin’s actions. Given that Russia’s physical territorial borders are—and will likely remain—intact, Putin’s decision to destabilize Eastern European states that were once satellite countries under the Soviet sphere of influence is indicative of an offensive neorealist ideology. Moscow can only be aiming to restore the reach of its former regional hegemony and undermine the current international order.

Russian aggression can be interpreted as a response to the three waves of NATO expansion. In 1999, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic joined NATO. Around five years later, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania followed. In 2009, Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro signed on. With each wave, Russian decision makers perceived, and were aggravated by, increased aggregation of hostile power. Although the West cited stability and democracy promotion as its benign motivations for expansion, Putin reacted by modernizing the Russian military and threatening invasion. In recent years, Moscow has proven that these threats were, and are, credible. Putin used a combination of low-level hybrid warfare and nuclear brinkmanship to deter outside intervention

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against Ukraine and Georgia, and deployed troops in Crimea (Lanozka 2016, 175).

Even considering the increase in aggression from both parties, a direct altercation between the United States and Russia is extremely unlikely. First, Ukraine and Georgia were not under NATO protection. Extending military conflict to NATO-protected territory is unlikely, due to the Article V provision of the treaty, which states that an attack against a single NATO state is treated as an attack against all member states. The potential costs of an all-out war with the entirety of NATO are high for Russia. Given the status quo scenario—where Russia is making hostile threats but not taking concrete action against Baltic states—and the assumption that NATO does not continue to expand its membership, it would be risky for Russia to test NATO's resolve without additional provocation, especially given the alliance's more advanced military capabilities and forward deployment. Second, even if Article V is not credible, NATO falls apart, and Russia invades without immediate consequence, the United States would be able to abandon its commitment to its allies and avoid a direct war.

On the international stage, alliances play an important role in altering the balance of power and adding to the power of deterrence. An alliance is defined as a formal or informal commitment between two or more states for security cooperation, formed to augment each member's power, security, and influence (Miller 2018a). Alliances may prevent conflict because the increase in combined power can deter potentially unfriendly countries. However, alliances may also cause conflict in, for example, cases where increased protection may lead to the emboldenment of junior partners, and the senior partners are unable to restrain their junior partner's actions. Additionally, increased aggregate power may worsen the effects of a security dilemma—the problem that arises when a country's military buildup can be perceived as offensive even if it is intended to be defensive.

A security dilemma is tied to a country's perception of threat. On one hand, alliances may counteract a security dilemma by identifying partners with benign intentions. On the other hand, they can also contribute to the dilemma by creating military capabilities that have the potential to be used offensively, increasing perceptions of hostility. Brett Leeds found that the effects of alliances on conflict depend on the alliance type (Leeds 2003). Aggression results unless states and alliances explicitly promise only defensive aid. For this reason, actors in the international arena should not only assess the balance of power, but also the balance of threat. A state may wield great military power while having only defensive motivations, and thus have low threat. According to Stephen Walt, four factors contribute to calculations of threat: aggregate power, offensive capabilities, geographic proximity, and perceived aggressive intentions (Walt 1985). Russia's assessment of threat may take into account the high aggregate power of NATO, perceive forward deployments to be offensive and aggressive, and view any NATO expansion as intruding on its regional sphere of influence.

NATO member states situated in Eastern Europe are concerned about the United States abandoning its commitment to protect them. These concerns are exacerbated by the United States's powerful position on the world stage and its mostly

uninhibited freedom of action. Michael Beckley argues that the United States can use four mechanisms to limit entrapment risks: loopholes in alliance treaties, sidestepping commitments, establishing diverse allies to cite pressures for restraint, and reining in dependent allies (Beckley 2015). Even if these mechanisms are not used, the United States would likely prefer to suffer the reputational costs of making an incredible commitment to NATO than the costs associated with engaging in war with Russia. Abandonment may not even be an issue if the United States develops infrastructure reinforcement and logistical improvement to support the credible territorial defense of Eastern Europe. By ensuring the mobility of potential theaters and assets, NATO can introduce ambiguity of response and strategic flexibility if Article V is declared to reduce the chance an attack could be manipulated into a credibility test. These deterrence tactics reduce the likelihood that the United States and Russia will go to war with each other.

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Another prominent deterrent of war that both the United States and Russia possess are their massive nuclear arsenals. Deterrence is one of two main variants of coercion, which is defined as the use of threats, the limited application of force, or use of punishment to prevent an actor from doing something (Miller 2018b). For deterrence to be successful, a threat must be credible, have proportional cost, and have credible assurance. This means that a target must perceive the ability and resolve for a state to implement the threat, it must be unable to defy with noncompliance, and it must be credibly and explicitly assured that compliance will ensure that no punishment will result. In the case of Ukraine and Georgia, Russia successfully used its nuclear power to prevent outside intervention. With those historical precedents in mind, we must assess Russia's potential success in deterring foreign intervention if it were to occupy a NATO member state.

Vipin Narang argues that the extent of nuclear deterrence depends on a state's nuclear posture (Narang 2009–2010). A catalytic posture relies on the willingness of a third party to defuse conflict and act as a nuclear patron. Assured retaliation requires a secure second strike to deter another country's first use and coercion. Asymmetric retaliation, classified as the most effective posture for deterrence, aims to deter both nuclear and conventional attack and only requires a capability for first use. The United States maintains a policy of assured retaliation and reserves the right to a first use option. Russia, since it is weaker in terms of conventional military strength, may use asymmetric retaliation. But even given Russia's aggressive posture, security scholars who subscribe to nuclear optimism seem to agree that nuclear war between the two countries is improbable.

According to these scholars, nuclear weapon use is unlikely and the possession of warheads decreases the odds of war. The costs of a nuclear war and escalation risks far outweigh any potential benefits, so deterrence is generally viewed to be powerful and stable. Since nuclear arsenals have been developed, there has not been any great power war, or war between nuclear-armed states. Furthermore, the safeguards in place for warheads ensure that potential for miscalculations and accidents are minimized.

Contrastingly, nuclear pessimists argue that the lack of great power war can be contributed to other factors, such as norm evolution and increasing costs of war. Nuclear weapons may incentivize preventive war or low-level conflict and embolden states. Additionally, this view observes that humans, the physical weapon technology, and organizations governing nuclear use are fallible, so deterrence is fragile (Miller 2018c).

Neither of these views is completely correct. But, they are instructional in assessing the possibility of war between the United States and Russia. Another aspect that should be considered is that norms that stigmatize and constrain first use can also determine whether states use nuclear weapons (Tannenwald 1999). Russia is more likely to use low-level hybrid warfare to intimidate its weaker neighbors, violate their sovereignty, and meddle in their internal affairs without resorting to a full-fledged military crisis that may include the use of nuclear weapons (Rumer, et. al 2017).

PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF WAR

Although the use of nuclear weapons may be clearly and rationally excluded from a set of military options, warheads may be deployed if states miscommunicate or misperceive other states' intentions. In the case of the United States' invasion of Iraq, information asymmetries resulted in miscalculations by both sides regarding the other's intentions, resolve, and capabilities (Duelfer and Dyson, 2011). In an anarchic international system, intentions are never perfectly clear and no centralized, effective international authority exists to maintain order. Cognitive biases and misperceptions may be causes of war if elite decision-makers interpret ambiguous information to fit their preexisting views, ignore contradictory evidence, and fill their knowledge gaps with faulty mental schema.

In the case of the United States and Russia, the United States pushed for NATO expansion to deter Russian aggression, encourage regional stability in Eastern Europe, increase Western influence, promote democracy, and prevent German-Russian conflict at the close of World War II— all seemingly benign motivations. However, Russia had, and has, a geopolitical outlook that took into account the geographic proximity of NATO member states, assessed the potential of hostile intentions behind the treaty, and perceived infringement upon areas that once were under its historical sphere of influence. Misperception of intentions regarding the existence (or lack thereof) of a NATO non-expansion pledge also came into play during the Ukraine crisis and Georgia's occupation. Although there was never a written, codified pledge, Russian officials cited expansion as a grievance and a reason for why Russia intervened in Georgia and Ukraine. Their basis for intervention relied on signals and public statements received from the United States, from an administration that internally did not have a cohesive, clear position. NATO's leaders had hoped that expanding its zone of protection in Europe and fostering democracy, stability, and peace would entice Russia to become a strategic partner of the organization (Kroenig 2015). NATO made reassurances to Russia that its force pressure would not encroach on Russia's former spheres of influence, but Putin saw expanding Western influence in former Soviet territories to be a geopolitical

catastrophe and reacted by modernizing the Russian military and threatening invasion.

One important empirical leg of the broader psychological explanation of war is prospect theory, which relies on the idea that humans disproportionately weigh losses over gains from any particular reference point and are often incapable of processing information in fully rational ways, instead relying on heuristics and biases for decision-making. More practically, this theory suggests that leaders behave more aggressively when they feel like they are losing status or power (Miller 2018d). To enumerate the findings of prospect theory more clearly, it states that people: 1) are disproportionately attuned to losses rather than gains 2) take risks to protect what they possess or recover what they have lost 3) are driven to obtain high status and honor 4) act aggressively when frustrated 5) fall prey to the “sunk cost fallacy,” which is when they irrationally persist in a lost cause and 6) often seek revenge (Rumer, et. al 2017). Rumer et al. notes that “while [Putin] has demonstrated a rational and calculating streak, he has also been less risk-averse and more unpredictable than previous Russian leaders” (Rumer, et. al 2017). Prospect theory explains the paradigm shift in Russia’s foreign policy to ethno-nationalist ideology (Tsygankov 2015). Under this ideology, Putin intends to defend Russians everywhere in Eurasia and reunify territories in the former Soviet space (Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, 2015).

Although Moscow seeks to remain a major player on the international stage, some political scientists have determined that Russian leaders have abandoned Soviet-era ambitions of global domination and retain bad memories of the Cold War-era arms race (Trenin 2016). Furthermore, while an inadvertent conflict spiral may lead to war, we have seen through the cases of Syria and Ukraine that Russia is very careful to avoid a direct military confrontation with the United States.

CONCLUSION

An increased frequency of proxy wars or cyber-attacks between the United States and Russia is more likely than the occurrence of a conventional or nuclear interstate war. Hybrid warfare can be used to incrementally perform subtle, revisionist actions to prevent an automatic, robust military response that may result from the invocation of Article V. These actions would more easily be justifiable and have more “plausible deniability” than an outright large-scale military invasion. Furthermore, Russia could engage in nuclear brinkmanship to deter NATO intervention and offset NATO’s conventional superiority, especially since Russia’s resources are more limited than those of the United States. In addition, NATO would likely not be willing to risk nuclear war over the destabilization of, or minor territorial encroachment of a member state.

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