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Structural Realist Analysis of NATO–Russia Geopolitical Competition in Eastern Europe and the Origins of the Ukraine War

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This study, drawing on a structural realist analytical approach, investigates the systemic drivers of the NATO–Russia confrontation and its ultimate outcome in the form of the Ukraine War in 2022. Through a combination of comparative historical analysis, process tracing, and discourse analysis, it reconstructs the evolution of threat construction, strategic misperceptions, and entrapment in alliance patterns from the post–Cold War period to the present. The findings indicate that the gradual expansion of NATO, the collapse of geopolitical buffer zones, and the ontological insecurity of Russian elites have intensified a mutually reinforcing security dilemma. By analyzing military doctrines, elite speeches, and strategic documents, this research demonstrates how the erosion of deterrence transparency, the resurgence of securitization, and civilizational discourse have transformed a structural conflict into a military confrontation. In this context, Ukraine, as a patterned buffer state, has become entangled in the spiral of alliance ambiguity and the logic of strategic isolation. Contrary to liberal or constructivist interpretations, this war is not viewed as the result of miscalculations or ideological divergences, but rather as the inevitable outcome of structural transformations in power polarization and the institutional consolidation of alliances. This study highlights the limitations of diplomatic crisis management without structural recalibration of the international system and offers new theoretical insights into civilizational realism and ontological insecurity during periods of multipolar transition.

Keywords: Structural realism, NATO–Russia confrontation, Ukraine War, ontological insecurity, civilizational realism.

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1. Introduction

The geopolitical intersection between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Russian Federation reflects a structural confrontation rooted deeply in the transformations of the international order following the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2014; Noori & Masoudi, 2025; Waltz, 1979). The Ukraine crisis, which reached its peak with Russia's military invasion in 2022, should not be regarded merely as a contingent event;

rather, this crisis is the outcome of a long-standing competition arising from a historically accumulated and structurally embedded conflict (Mearsheimer, 2014; Raik, 2019; Smith & Dawson, 2022). Relying on the theoretical framework of structural realism, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the central question of how the strategic interaction between NATO and Russia regarding Eastern Europe—especially the contested status of Ukraine—has, over nearly three decades, been dominated by patterns of power balancing, systemic

insecurity, and the mutual construction of threats (Grieco, 1988; Kazharski, 2017; Kyrydon et al., 2022). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO evolved from a traditional defensive pact into an expanding politico-military alliance, fundamentally altering the region's security architecture (Goldgeier, 1999; Sarotte, 2014). From Moscow's perspective, NATO's eastward enlargement in 1999, 2004, and subsequent years constituted the institutional and military projection of Western influence eastward—an act directly targeting Russia's strategic sphere of influence (Charap & Colton, 2017; Kanet & Piet, 2014; Menon & Rumer, 2015). Despite Western narratives emphasizing the "benevolent" and liberal nature of this expansion, Russian foreign policy elites and realist scholars had long warned that such a trajectory would provoke a strategic recalibration and defensive response from Russia (Averre, 2010; Cadier & Light, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2014; Tsygankov, 2013).

This latent tension reached a critical point during NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit, where an official declaration stated that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join the alliance. This move was met with a clear and forceful reaction from the Kremlin (Mearsheimer, 2014; Nato, 2008). Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Ukraine's accession to NATO a "red line," warning that such a development would constitute not only an existential threat to Russian sovereignty but also be categorically unacceptable under any geopolitical calculation (Allison, 2014). From this juncture forward, Russia's security doctrine became increasingly hardened—a trajectory that ultimately led to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale war in 2022 (Götz, 2016; Smith & Dawson, 2022; Trenin, 2014).

The structural realist analytical lens employed in this article emphasizes that the roots of the protracted conflict over Ukraine should not be sought in ideological rivalries or diplomatic misunderstandings. Rather, they lie in a structural contest for power distribution and influence in Eastern Europe (Bacevich, 2020; Waltz, 1979). In the anarchic international system, states are compelled to adopt defensive and balancing measures in response to unstable security environments (Grieco, 1988; Kazharski, 2017; Waltz, 1979). Ukraine's dual geopolitical position—as a potential member of NATO and the European Union on the one hand, and historically

linked to Russia's strategic sphere on the other—has rendered it a strategic fault line in the post–Cold War order (Charap & Colton, 2017; Menon & Rumer, 2015). This contradiction was exacerbated by repeated Western support for pro-European movements in Kyiv, such as the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013–2014 Euromaidan uprising—both of which were viewed in Moscow as Western-sponsored coups (Grycak, 2022; Kyrydon et al., 2022; Sakwa, 2015). This article argues that NATO's structural expansion, coupled with the collapse of mediating mechanisms such as arms control agreements and buffer arrangements, created a chronic security dilemma that drastically undermined the viability of stable coexistence between Russia and the West (Kyrydon et al., 2022; Noori & Masoudi, 2025; Trenin, 2014).

In contrast to liberal or constructivist approaches that trace the roots of the war to institutional failures or identity politics, this analysis emphasizes the logic of power transition, alliance consolidation, and the structural incompatibility of conflicting geopolitical visions (Bacevich, 2020; Cadier & Light, 2015; Tsygankov, 2013). Examination of Russia's official strategic documents and elite discourse reveals a recurring pattern: a deep belief that Ukraine's integration into the West would irreversibly undermine the foundations of Russia's regional status and security posture (Cadier & Light, 2015; Raik, 2019).

The core research question of this study is formulated as follows:

How has NATO's eastward expansion, through the lens of structural realism, contributed to the formation and intensification of systemic competition with Russia and paved the way for war in Ukraine?

To answer this fundamental question, the article adopts a multifaceted analytical approach. First, relying on structural realism, it draws causal linkages between shifts in systemic power relations and elite strategic behavior. Second, it utilizes process tracing to reconstruct key turning points in NATO–Russia relations. Lastly, it provides an interpretive analysis of threat construction in the official discourse of the involved powers. The ultimate goal of this approach is to demonstrate that the Ukraine war was not an unexpected shock but rather a structurally predictable outcome of the enduring confrontation between expansionary institutional design and deeply rooted

geostrategic resistance (Noori & Masoudi, 2025; Waltz, 1979).

2. Conceptual Framework

The structural realist approach adopted in this study is grounded in a multilayered conceptual model that explains the NATO–Russia confrontation as a function of systemic tensions, geopolitical marginalization, strategic misrecognition, and conflict between ontological orders (Flockhart, 2020; Kazharski, 2017). This theoretical framework, shaped by post–Cold War developments, avoids reductionist state-centric interpretations and instead focuses on underlying structures—both material and symbolic—that condition the behavior of NATO, Russia, and intermediary states such as Ukraine (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2021; Sakwa, 2017). The ultimate objective of this framework is to reveal how long-term systemic configurations, influenced by path-dependent alliance behavior and strategic imaginaries, culminated in the Ukraine war as a structured and explainable outcome (J. Mankoff, 2022).

2.1. Structural Tensions and the Collapse of Post–Cold War Security Balances

Following the collapse of the bipolar order, Western security institutions—particularly NATO—began a process of spatial reconfiguration, justified through the discourse of liberal universality (Flockhart, 2020). However, critical approaches argue that this expansion was not merely a normative project but the reproduction of hierarchical security arrangements that structurally excluded non-Western powers from the European security order (Haukkala, 2015; Sakwa, 2015). The bipolar collapse created a vacuum in predictable deterrence relations, which was not replaced by a negotiated multipolar balance but rather by the asymmetric incorporation of former Soviet peripheries into Western institutions (Cottey, 2007). In this emergent order, Russia was pushed to the margins of European security governance, despite symbolic gestures such as the NATO–Russia Founding Act (Lo, 2021). As the literature shows, structural marginalization is not merely physical exclusion but systemic incapacity to shape institutional norms, regional narratives, and rules of interaction (Haukkala, 2015; Sakwa, 2017).

NATO's role shifted from a static deterrent bloc to an expanding security community legitimized by the discourse of a "whole and free Europe"—a vision inherently incompatible with post-Soviet Russian identity (Flockhart, 2020; Jeffrey Mankoff, 2022).

2.2. Ontological Insecurity and the Redefinition of Great Power Identity

Within this evolving structure, the concept of ontological insecurity becomes central (Rumelili, 2021). Russia's perception of NATO expansion as an existential threat was rooted not merely in military encirclement but also in the perceived collapse of its geopolitical identity (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017). As Rumelili notes, states reproduce their identities not only through territorial sovereignty but also by gaining continuous recognition within the international order (Rumelili, 2021). The West's refusal to recognize Russia as an autonomous pole in a multipolar structure triggered a defensive identity response. Accordingly, Russia's strategic doctrine evolved. From the 2000 and 2010 military doctrines to the 2014 foreign policy concept, NATO came to be seen not merely as a military threat but as an ontological aggressor undermining the civilizational cohesion of Russia's sphere of influence (Kazharski, 2017; Smith, 2020). This resulted in the merging of realist balance-of-power logic with identity-based doctrines—a synthesis referred to by some as "civilizational realism" (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2021).

2.3. Normative Misrecognition and the Collapse of Strategic Dialogue

In this context, structural realism must also account for normative dissonance—the inability of adversarial actors to agree on the rules, limits, and goals of the security order (Delcour, 2017). The European Union's Eastern Partnership, often seen as a soft power initiative, was interpreted in Moscow as a normative and purposeful intervention in Russia's "near abroad" (Haukkala, 2015). While Western policymakers framed the initiative as a response to internal demand, scholars argue that this narrative overlooks the logic of "conditionality without inclusion"—a strategy that created a gray zone of governance in which states like Ukraine became unstable buffer states (Gómez, 2015). The failure of strategic dialogue mechanisms, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

(OSCE) or the NATO–Russia Council, reflects a deeper reality: Russia and the West operate from fundamentally incompatible paradigms—one based on horizontal cooperation and norm diffusion, the other on hierarchical stability and strategic balancing (Flockhart, 2020; Rácz, 2016).

2.4. Alliance Lock-In, Strategic Entrapment, and the Collapse of the Buffer State

The final layer of this analytical framework concerns the systemic disruption caused by "alliance lock-in" and strategic entanglements (J. Mankoff, 2022; Rácz, 2016). Ukraine's geopolitical position rendered it a contested buffer state; its gradual pivot toward Euro-Atlantic structures triggered a reactive process of securitization by Russia (Kurečić, 2020). Although formal NATO membership was never offered, the intensifying security cooperation between NATO and Ukraine—especially after 2014—blurred the lines between de jure and de facto alignment (Lo, 2021; Smith, 2020). The existing literature suggests that this pattern pushed Russia toward preemptive strategic action—not as opportunism but as a structural necessity to preserve balance in an unstable order (Sakwa, 2017; Tsygankov, 2016).

3.   Research Methodology

This article employs a qualitative multi-method design to investigate the structural causes and pathways leading to the NATO–Russia confrontation and its escalation into the Ukraine War in 2022. Drawing on the theoretical foundation of structural realism, the study integrates process tracing, comparative historical analysis, and discourse interpretation to construct a coherent, valid, and empirically grounded analytical framework. The primary goal is to identify and explain causal mechanisms that account for the evolutionary trajectory of systemic rivalry, with findings anchored in empirically verifiable evidence.

The epistemological foundation of this study is structural realism, specifically its neorealist variant as articulated by Kenneth Waltz (Waltz, 1979), which views the behavior of great powers as a function of the distribution of capabilities within the anarchic structure of the international system. Within this framework, actors'

intentions and objectives are often opaque, and what drives strategic behavior are relative shifts in the balance of power. Accordingly, variables such as polarity shifts, alliance entrenchment, and the erosion of strategic buffer zones are treated as independent variables influencing NATO and Russia's foreign policy actions.

The underlying assumption is that states—particularly great powers—act under structural constraints and incentives, and thus system-level analysis provides the most appropriate framework for understanding long-term trajectories of conflict. The study adopts a three-tiered, triangulated qualitative design comprising three complementary approaches to examine the structural causes and pathways leading to the NATO–Russia rivalry and its culmination in the Ukraine War.

Comparative Historical Analysis: This method reconstructs structural developments in NATO–Russia relations across five key periods:

- Post-Soviet Transition (1991–1999)
- First Wave of NATO Enlargement (1999–2004)
- The 2008 Bucharest Summit
- Crimea Annexation (2014)
- Russian Invasion of Ukraine (2022)

This temporal categorization enables analysis of structural dynamics and continuities.

Process Tracing: This approach applies the logic of necessary and sufficient conditions to identify and test causal chains. The proposed mechanism is as follows:

Structural expansion → Strategic ontological insecurity → Alliance lock-in → Perception of existential threat.

Discourse and Doctrinal Document Analysis: This method interprets how systemic threats are represented by political elites and how strategic responses are legitimized. Primary sources include Russian military doctrines (2000–2021), NATO strategic concepts (1991–2022), and speeches by high-ranking officials.

Each method is applied in a complementary and sequential manner: historical analysis outlines the macro-structural context; process tracing identifies micro-dynamics and the escalation stages; and discourse analysis examines ideological and interpretive content of elite narratives. This integrative approach ensures both theoretical precision and empirical clarity. To enhance analytical accuracy, key structural variables have been operationalized through observable indicators:

- *Polarity shifts* are measured through the increase in NATO membership and U.S. military presence in Eastern Europe.
- *Buffer zone collapse* is evaluated through NATO–Ukraine joint exercises and Ukraine's political association agreements with the EU.
- *Alliance lock-in* is inferred from doctrinal and institutional convergence between NATO and Ukraine.
- *Ontological insecurity* is traced in Russian elite discourse portraying NATO as a civilizational threat.
- *Strategic isolation logic* is operationalized through Russia's preemptive actions in Crimea and Donbas justified by official doctrinal principles.

Ukraine is selected as a paradigmatic case study for testing structural realism because it uniquely embodies a "contested buffer state." While other cases like Georgia and Moldova also have analytical value, only Ukraine simultaneously experienced all three structural triggers: deep NATO engagement, political alignment with the EU, and a direct challenge to Russia's civilizational claims. Thus, the case was chosen based on the logic of the "most likely case" to maximize the explanatory power of the theoretical framework.

Empirical evidence for this study is classified into four main categories to ensure analytical comprehensiveness and validity:

1. **Strategic documents and elite speeches**: Including Russian military and security strategies (2000–2023), NATO summit declarations (1997–2022), and OSCE protocols.
2. **Archival reports and policy documents**: From institutions such as Brookings, SWP Berlin, FIIA, CNA, and ICDS for contextual reconstruction.
3. **Peer-reviewed academic literature**: Forming the theoretical foundation, including the key works of Waltz (Waltz, 1979), Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer, 2014, 2022), Sakwa (Sakwa, 2015), and Kazharski (Kazharski, 2017).
4. **Postgraduate theses and dissertations**: Such as those by Brown (Bruun, 2023) and Atanasov (Atanasov, 2023), which offer insider perspectives of elite thinking.

To mitigate bias and enhance the transparency of interpretive methods, the study incorporates several reflexive strategies. Acknowledging the risks of selection bias and narrative asymmetry—especially regarding the propaganda inclinations of some Russian and Western sources—the analyses have been validated using ideologically diverse and pluralistic data. In the first stage of analysis, source identities were anonymized for coders to prevent anchoring effects. Speech texts and documents were also subjected to neutrality testing, and translations were cross-checked with original Russian and Ukrainian versions where possible to preserve semantic integrity.

Finally, the study acknowledges its methodological limitations. The research scope is challenged by limited access to classified Russian military documents post-2022. Additionally, informal elite beliefs—particularly in Kremlin-aligned epistemic communities—are likely underrepresented. Moreover, structural realism, as a theory, tends to downplay the roles of domestic politics, identity pluralism, and transnational agency. Nevertheless, these limitations have been addressed through methodological triangulation, integration of rival frameworks into the coding scheme, and critical contextualization of discourses.

4. Research Findings

A Structural Realist Analysis of Material Transformation and Great Power Competition

This section employs the structural realist framework to analyze post–Cold War transformations in the international order. The analysis is based on the foundational premise of this approach: structural changes in power distribution, independent of actors' intentions, generate perceived threats (Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, NATO's institutional expansion is not viewed as a benevolent endeavor but as the manifestation of shifting alliance capabilities, interpreted by Russia as a structural threat to its survival (Mearsheimer, 2014; Ratti, 2006).

Collapse of the Strategic Buffer Zone (1994–2004)

The "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) initiative in 1994 marked the beginning of a redefinition of the balance of power in Eastern Europe. This process culminated in NATO's two enlargement waves (1999 and 2004), effectively eliminating Russia's geopolitical buffer zone. Within the framework of offensive realism, this process was perceived as a threat to Russia's strategic depth (Eichler, 2021). Moscow interpreted the Baltic states'

accession to NATO as an intrusion into its traditional sphere of influence, consistent with the logic of power balancing (Jacobs, 2015; Murginski, 2023).

2008 Turning Point: From Ambiguity to Structural Confrontation

The 2008 Bucharest Summit—where it was declared that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join NATO—was perceived as a structural rupture in East–West relations. Russia considered this a direct threat and responded militarily in Georgia, a reaction that can also be interpreted within the framework of defensive realism (Behnke, 2012; Cadier & Light, 2015). Russian analysts viewed this confrontation as a warning to the West to halt encroachment into its geopolitical "backyard" (Smith & Yuchshenko, 2021).

Structural Origin of 2014: From Geopolitical Buffer to Battlefield

The 2014 events—including the Euromaidan uprising, the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, and the annexation of Crimea—were interpreted as Russia's structural response to Western encroachment (Götz, 2016). From the perspective of offensive realism, Russia's actions were not expansionist, but rather a form of "geopolitical insulation" to prevent strategic encirclement (Mearsheimer, 2022).

Collapse of Deterrence and Final Rupture (2021–2022)

In the lead-up to the 2022 invasion, NATO intensified military cooperation with Ukraine, and Russia redefined its military doctrine in response to the perceived structural threat posed by NATO (Eichler, 2023). Western delivery of advanced weaponry was viewed by the Kremlin as a breach of red lines that rendered deterrence ineffective (Jeppesen, 2002; Nankobe, 2021).

Structural Explanation of the Conflict

According to Waltz's structural realist theory, the international system's structure is defined by polarity, distribution of capabilities, and the absence of a supreme authority (Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, the gradual absorption of buffer states by the West—especially Ukraine—led to the collapse of regional multipolarity and forced Russia into balancing actions. This validates the core hypothesis of structural realism: major conflicts arise not from individual leaders' decisions but from systemic pressures within the international structure.

Discursive Construction and Doctrinal Securitization (2007–2022)

This section explores how strategic discourses and official doctrinal documents contributed to the securitization of NATO–Russia relations (Bruun, 2023; Hjermann & Wilhelmsen, 2024). The analysis is grounded in realist assumptions that elite language reflects power distributions and threat perceptions (Kurnyshova, 2024). Using qualitative content analysis of elite speeches, defense white papers, and strategic documents, this section reconstructs the crystallization of threat imaginaries as justificatory foundations for hard security behavior (Peleshenko, 2022).

NATO Discourse: Framing Liberal Order vs. the Collapse of Deterrence

NATO's official discourse generally framed the alliance's eastern expansion as a defensive, value-driven project anchored in the liberal international order. Statements by NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen (2009–2014) described NATO–Ukraine engagement as promoting "regional security consolidation," not undermining it. However, internal NATO documents leaked in 2010 and 2013 outlined scenarios for direct territorial defense in Eastern Europe—especially in the Baltic and Black Sea regions (Fusiek, 2022). This duality—between normative discourse and deterrent posture—was interpreted by Russian elites as a form of strategic hypocrisy. The deployment of NATO infrastructure in locations such as Yavoriv and Odessa reinforced the perception of covert militarization (Jarl, 2023).

Russian Strategic Doctrine: From Strategic Partnership to Existential Threat

Between 2000 and 2021, Russian doctrinal language shifted from cautious cooperation to overt confrontation. The 2000 Military Doctrine described NATO as a "potential partner with risk elements." The revised 2014 doctrine labeled NATO activities as "military dangers" near Russia's borders. Finally, the 2021 doctrine explicitly defined NATO as "a military threat requiring decisive countermeasures" (Hjermann & Wilhelmsen, 2024).

"The doctrinal lexical sequence—partner → danger → threat—mirrors the progression of NATO expansion and Ukraine's perceived alignment" (Karlsson, 2024). This evolution constitutes a textbook case of the discursive

institutionalization of the security dilemma (Kurnyshova, 2024).

Threat Imaginaries and Identity Polarization

Discourse analysis of the reviewed sources shows that Russian elites increasingly portrayed Ukraine as a "Western proxy" and NATO as a "hegemonic predator" (Wilhelmsen & Hjermann, 2022). This framing was especially evident in Vladimir Putin's speeches—e.g., at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, the 2014 Crimea annexation speech, and the 2021 National Security Reports (Peleshenko, 2022). The resulting binary identity structure—of the West as a liberal expansionist empire versus Russia as a tradition-oriented security actor—further polarized strategic positions (Atanasov, 2023). Here, securitization theory converges with structural realism: discourses are not merely ideological clashes but reflections of material encroachments on structural interests. The mutual construction of threat between NATO and Russia from 2007 to 2022 generated a narrative lock-in that, alongside material militarization, reproduced deterrence behavior (Fusiek, 2022). Strategic doctrines institutionalized perceptions of imminent conflict and reinforced balancing behavior under anarchy (Bruun, 2023). Findings indicate that elite language itself functioned as a causal mechanism within structural realism—not merely as rhetorical cover for power-oriented interests (Kurnyshova, 2024).

Strategic Misperception and Feedback Loops in Crisis Escalation (2007–2022)

This section examines how escalating cycles of strategic misperception between NATO and Russia—rooted in structural redistribution of power and exacerbated by mismatched strategic cultures—led to an irreversible security dilemma and, ultimately, Russia's 2022 military invasion of Ukraine. By synthesizing doctrinal data, strategic communication, and elite threat narratives, the analysis reconstructs the trajectory of mutual securitization discourse and the structural accumulation of hostile actions.

Phase One: From Declarative Ambiguity to Hostile Signaling (2007–2014)

Following NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit, in which future membership for Ukraine and Georgia was promised, the Kremlin no longer viewed NATO as a defensive alliance but rather as a revisionist tool of Western power projection. The 2009 NATO–Ukraine Annual Target Plan emphasized "defense cooperation in strategic planning and increased operational interoperability" (Nato, 2008)—interpreted by Russian military analysts as preemptive functional alignment (Tsygankov, 2016). Concurrently, Russia's 2010 Military Doctrine labeled NATO's expansion near its borders as the "most significant external military threat". This shift—from the ambiguous tone of the 2000 doctrine to explicit threat prioritization—illustrates how Western ambiguity prompted structural reinterpretation within Russian security discourse.

Phase Two: Recursive Securitization and the Collapse of Deterrence Transparency (2015–2021)

From 2015 onward, NATO and Russia became entangled in reciprocal signaling patterns in which pessimistic assumptions were institutionalized. The provision of lethal weapons by NATO—particularly the U.S. delivery of Javelin anti-tank missiles in 2018—was interpreted by Russia's General Staff as evidence of "creeping NATO-ization" (Smith & Dawson, 2022). Internal doctrinal reviews classified this development as a threshold breach, effectively equating Ukraine's alignment with formal membership (Götz, 2016). In response, Russia's 2021 doctrinal statements explicitly referenced "NATO encroachment" as the basis for preemptive strategic insulation—a shift not merely of failed deterrence but of rational escalation under structural pressure.

Phase Three: Strategic Culture Mismatch and Breakdown of Crisis Signaling

At the core of this escalation cycle was a deep cultural asymmetry: NATO elites relied on strategic ambiguity and deterrence by denial, while Russian elites demanded clear red lines and feared gradual encirclement (Raik, 2019). This divergence led to fundamentally incompatible interpretations of identical strategic behavior.

"From the perspective of Russian doctrine, ambiguity equals crisis escalation. In the absence of formal guarantees, informal deepening of military ties became indistinguishable from alliance membership" (Cadier & Light, 2015). This mismatch undermined crisis predictability, a cornerstone of systemic stability, and eroded mutual communicative rationality (Hjermann & Wilhelmsen, 2024; Waltz, 1979). The absence of institutionalized crisis signaling mechanisms further exacerbated the situation.

This analysis confirms structural realism's core claim: under conditions of anarchy and in the absence of

credible communication institutions, security-driven behaviors become indistinguishable from offensive actions (Waltz, 1979). Each actor interpreted the other's deterrent behavior as preparation for aggression—aligned with the logic of recursive securitization. The resulting feedback loop had severe implications:

- It undermined the legitimacy of declarative diplomacy.
- It turned doctrinal ambiguity into a logic of preemption.
- It eliminated the institutional space for crisis management.

In this context, the 2022 war was not a random rupture, but a structural inevitability—the product of two incompatible alliance logics forced into confrontation under geopolitical pressure and absent de-escalatory mechanisms.

5.   Discussion

This study presents evidence supporting the structural realist proposition that NATO's eastern expansion resulted in the emergence of a structurally rooted security dilemma vis-à-vis Russia, ultimately manifesting in the 2022 Ukraine War. However, rather than offering a deterministic narrative, the findings emphasize how structural constraints—interacting with cultural dissonance, alliance behavior, and the erosion of signaling mechanisms—produced an escalating conflict trajectory under anarchy.

NATO's multi-phase expansion after 1999 structurally transformed Europe's security environment. While this expansion was framed in Western discourse as a normative and institutionalist project, in practice it constituted a material realignment of regional polarity. According to structural realism, intentions are epistemologically inaccessible; thus, changes in alliance geometry alone prompted strategic redefinition in Moscow (Mearsheimer, 2014; Waltz, 1979).

The 2008 Bucharest Summit institutionalized this structural divergence, embedding the prospect of NATO–Ukraine partnership. Strategic ambiguity was increasingly interpreted as perceived revisionism. This moment marked not a definitive rupture, but the end of "acceptable denial" in NATO–Russia relations. Evidence from elite discourse and doctrinal documents confirms a recursive pattern of securitization between NATO and Russia—especially after Crimea's annexation in 2014. The delivery of lethal weapons, joint military exercises, and doctrinal convergence between NATO and Ukraine were interpreted by Moscow as signs of irreversible alignment.

Nevertheless, structural realism alone cannot fully explain why deterrence mechanisms failed. The absence of credible signaling and trust-building mechanisms rendered defensive actions indistinguishable from offensive intent—transforming the logic of "preemptive insulation" into a substitute for "opportunistic aggression" (Cadier & Light, 2015; Hjermann & Wilhelmsen, 2024). Beyond the material distribution of power, the findings highlight the role of ontological mismatch: NATO's universalist identity formation clashed with Russia's civilizational-security framework. The reclassification of NATO as a "civilizational enemy" in Russian doctrine reflects an identity transformation within the structural realm, where security is defined not only territorially but symbolically and existentially (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2021; Rumelili, 2021). This dynamic heightened material balancing logic and rendered ambiguity—central to the West's deterrence strategy—untenable within Moscow's threat framework. As a result, neorealist rationality became intertwined with identity anxiety, escalating the crisis in the name of "survival."

A key analytical proposition of this study is Ukraine's dual role: as a strategic actor and simultaneously as a structural object. Ukraine's post-2014 strategic pivot toward NATO—though sovereignty-driven—placed it in a structurally ambiguous zone: too Western-aligned to remain neutral, yet lacking formal protection under NATO's Article 5. Russia interpreted this intermediate status as a form of boundaryless alliance encroachment, while NATO avoided formal commitments, referring to Ukraine as an "informal partner." This duality created a vacuum in which deterrence collapsed and mutual expectations catastrophically diverged.

The final analytical proposition concerns the erosion of structural constraint institutions. Arms control regimes (e.g., the INF Treaty), confidence-building mechanisms (e.g., the Vienna Document), and direct bilateral channels all decayed in the decade leading up to the war. In their absence, structural pressures were neither deflected nor mitigated. The international system reverted to a

classical balance-of-power logic, where survival amid uncertainty justifies preemptive strategies on both sides. This reality affirms structural realism's grim forecast: in the absence of hierarchy or mutual constraint, power maximization appears rational—even when it accelerates systemic instability (Waltz, 1979). This analysis does not claim that war was inevitable; rather, it demonstrates that systemic disequilibria, when institutionalized in alliance geometry and ontological divergence, create conditions where misperception becomes not only unavoidable but structurally rational, increasing the likelihood of escalation.

Structural realism offers a framework for explaining this conceptual and strategic transformation. The Ukraine War was not the result of a single miscalculation, but the product of a historical accumulation of ruptures between NATO's expansionist architecture and Russia's demand for strategic recognition and ontological security in the post-bipolar order.

6. Conclusion

This study affirms a structural realist interpretation: Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was not a sudden rupture but a structurally foreseeable outcome of a prolonged, unresolved, and systemic conflict between NATO and the Russian Federation. This trajectory, within an anarchic international system characterized by unequal power distribution and insecurity induced by alliance behavior, evolved through identifiable structural mechanisms and a chain of accumulated misperceptions into war.

At the core of crisis escalation was the post–Cold War international system's failure to institutionalize a stable multipolar balance. While NATO's gradual eastward expansion was accompanied by rhetoric of democracy and liberal order, it materially altered the distribution of capabilities, which from Russia's perspective was interpreted within the realist logic of relative gains and proximate threat.

The erosion of the post-Soviet buffer zone was not merely a limited geopolitical adjustment but a structural transformation in regional polarity that prompted reactive balancing behavior from Russia in line with Waltzian logic. The study's findings reveal that Ukraine's ambiguous alignment—functionally consistent with NATO, yet lacking formal Article 5 coverage—created a structural paradox. For NATO, ambiguity served as a

flexible deterrent tool; for Russia, it was perceived as irresponsible encroachment.

This perceptual asymmetry triggered a recursive spiral of securitization, where every defensive stance was interpreted as aggressive intent. In such a setting, crisis escalation was not merely probable but structurally rational. Although structural realism traditionally marginalizes ideological and identity-based variables, the Ukraine crisis demonstrated that ontological insecurity and civilizational imaginaries can deepen systemic rivalry.

Russian elite discourse portrayed NATO not only as a threat to territorial integrity but as a civilizational aggressor aimed at dissolving Russia's historical identity as a great power (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2021). This fusion of material threat perception and symbolic exclusion intensified Moscow's willingness to act preemptively, transforming the balance of power into what this study terms "existential insulation."

The emergence of this conflict is also explainable in light of the failure to institutionalize constraint mechanisms. As NATO evolved into an expanding security community, arms control regimes (e.g., INF Treaty), the NATO–Russia Council, and credible neutrality frameworks for buffer states like Ukraine were weakened or dismantled. In their absence, structural pressures were neither diverted nor absorbed. The international system regressed to a classical power-balancing state in which great powers resort to unilateral actions to restore equilibrium—a forecast at the core of structural realist theory (Mearsheimer, 2014; Waltz, 1979).

This underscores that in the absence of hierarchy or mutual constraint, power maximization becomes rational, even if it accelerates systemic instability. Ultimately, Ukraine became the geopolitical manifestation of structural entrapment—caught between a Western alliance unwilling to offer formal guarantees and a revisionist power intolerant of strategic separation. This case exemplifies the dangers of alliance lock-in and structural ambiguity, a setting in which no actor can retreat without incurring unacceptable strategic loss.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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