

# Russia's Pursuit of Superpower Status: Geopolitical Expansion, Political Strategies, and International Responses

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## Abstract

This paper investigates Russia's geopolitical ambitions and evaluates its strategies to achieve superpower status. Focusing on three critical areas - Russia's geopolitical expansion and power dynamics, contemporary political strategies, and the responses of international bodies like NATO and the EU - the paper examines how these factors contribute to and limit Russia's rise. Through the lens of Russian realism, the paper highlights key strategies, such as energy politics, cyber warfare, and disinformation campaigns, alongside aspirations rooted in modern Eurasianism and expansionism. It also explores how international sanctions and political responses influence Russia's trajectory, emphasizing the interconnected nature of global politics. The research concludes that while Russia's ambitions are evident, its position as a global superpower remains uncertain, contingent on external geopolitical factors and the evolving global power structure.

**Keywords:** Russia, geopolitical expansion, superpower, NATO, EU, energy politics

## Introduction

If politics is a game of chess, is Russia ready to call checkmate?

Several scholars argue that Russia's strive to become the only global superpower has existed since the rise of the Soviet Union, and its moves now attempt to fulfil the same. During the 20th century, Russia made great progress with this aim; with the USSR's defence advancements in the 1930s, Great Power status in 1945 (alongside the USA and UK), Soviet control and influence over Europe, North Korea, and China during the late Stalin period, and the rapid post-war restoration (WW2) of the economy (Ellman, 2022). The combination of these factors mitigated certain consequences after the fall of the USSR and led to the scope for Russia to rise to the height of its power again.

A recent paper analysed Russia's political strategy and found that Russia, as a rising power, is seeking to upset the hierarchy and replace the United States as the world's only global superpower (Feinstein and Pirro, 2021). This strive to become the only global superpower requires focusing on political strategy, the balance of traditional military hard power strategies with more contemporary approaches, and geopolitical strategy, such as withholding energy. The aforementioned would lead to both a global and regional impact on politics and, in turn, alter international relations as we know it today. International bodies are attempting to counterattack Russia's political moves only because this change in world order will bring about so many global and regional repercussions. Analytical efforts are being made in order to counter attacks against Russia's strategy, such as interventions by the UN, NATO, the EU, and G7. It is because Russia itself

holds complicated ties and relationships with the member countries of the EU and other regional bodies that the actions taken by these institutions are both limiting and contributing to Russia's attempt to power. For instance, to secure their nation's own futures, especially in terms of energy supply and geopolitics, many member nations are independently attempting to use smart power, leading to a distortion of their impact on Russia's strategy (Rossbach, 2018). In line with the aforementioned, this research paper aims to answer the following question: **To what extent have Russia's geopolitical expansion, contemporary political strategies, and the responses of international bodies to Russian actions contributed to and limited Russia's attempt to rise as a global superpower?**

This paper argues that Russia's geopolitical expansion and power dynamics, contemporary political influence strategies, and NATO, the EU, and other international bodies' responses to Russian actions all contribute to and limit Russia's attempt to rise as the only global superpower.

### **Russia's Political Expansion and Power Dynamics**

Eurasianism is one of the main pieces on the Russian side of the chessboard, with many papers analysing the Russian "obsession with identity" and its combination with cultural prioritisation in state politics as a tool for expansionist policies (Silviu, 2014). For instance, the manner through which Russia is attempting to preserve Soviet identity is seen to be aligning with elements of Eurasianism. The Soviet Union's expansion and control over Central Asia was integral to Eurasianist thought and can be interpreted as part of a broader attempt to create a unified Eurasian political and cultural bloc. The Soviet Union's expansionist ideals were clear during its reign, a political identity that Russia is attempting to continue today, using the excuse of cultural and civilisational diversification as an emissary for its realist and expansionist actions in areas such as Central Asia.

Historically, Soviet control over central Asia was largely limited to Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Kirgizia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. However, the Soviet regional classification of central Asia did not consist of Kazakhstan (Wheeler, 1955). This idea is consistent with the implementation of Eurasianism in the 21st century, where Kazakhstan is a member of the EEU. Despite its geographical location, this recognition of Kazakhstan as a nation, not part of Asia, is a key part of Russia's geopolitics during the 21st Century. "After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan was faced with domestic conditions that made cooperation with Russia rational. Kazakhstan inherited a large ethnic Russian population and a severe economic depression" (Stevens, 2020). This situation created a power dynamic between Russia and Kazakhstan, with Kazakhstan being both an ally and a beneficiary of Russian success, as it was in Russia's vested interest to protect Kazakhstan and gain a neighbouring ally with Soviet ties. Russia is using this allyship to continue pushing the narrative that it is not expansionism at the forefront of its relationships in what is considered Central Asia, but rather cultural and civilisational diversification.

However, in the 21st century, this dynamic is changing, and many are arguing that the Russia-Ukraine war is leading to Kazakhstan distancing itself from Russia. Some site alterations during what were previously routine behaviours are evidence for the same; for example, "during a visit to Russia, Kazakh President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev made a seemingly wry comment to President Vladimir Putin, stating that there are no doubts about the outcome of the forthcoming Russian presidential elections. This comment follows Tokayev's choice during his November 2023 visit to speak initially in Kazakh rather than Russian for the first time. Many ... characterise these moments as snubs to Putin – evidence that Kazakhstan is distancing itself from Russia" (Mallinson, 2024). While seemingly minute choices such as these have been made, there has also been a certain increase in closeness between the two nations. It has

been found that since the Russia-Ukraine war began, trade between Russia and Kazakhstan has increased, citing “2022 and 2023 have been record years for Russia-Kazakhstan economic cooperation, with trade at \$26 and \$27 billion respectively” (Mallinson, 2024). Thus, while changing, Russian relations with Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, remain an allyship (one inherently dependent on economic alliance and trade), inheriting many of the dynamics from Soviet history and displaying elements of Eurasianism.

While Soviet Russia is an influencing factor in Russia’s Eurasianism, the Putin-era Russian state is using modern Eurasianism. Dr Ray Silvius is one of the biggest champions of the same. Silvius argues that the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation manifests this ideology into terms that attempt to use “cultural particularity to express Russia’s improved position in international affairs and contemporary state priorities” (Wolczuk, Dragneva and Wallace, 2022); “the growth of national consciousness, cultural and civilisational diversity and other objective factors accelerate the process of shifting the development potential to new centres of economic growth and geopolitical influence and promote the democratisation of international relations” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). The policy emphasises on the role of “cultural and civilisational diversity” outlining the Russian “obsession with identity” that has manifested in strong relations and ties to states in the former Soviet Union - states that identify as Eurasian.

A prime example of this Eurasian fellowship is the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a body they likened to the European Union. The EEU consists of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, all states from the historical soviet region of control. Moreover, even Russia's actions in Crimea, Syria and now Ukraine are examples of Eurasianism. Richard Sawka (2011) argues that “Russia faces a three-fold challenge: to find an appropriate paradigm of ‘the international’ in external relations; to devise a model of ‘the political’ that can sustain domestic aspirations for autonomy and sovereignty; and to combine these two elements into a coherent order that can sustain engagement with other states and international society while allowing a coherent version of national identity to develop”. This manifests in three main political goals for Russia: external, internal, and combined Russian political identity. The aforementioned are then fulfilled through Russia’s three main contemporary political strategies: modern Eurasianism, realism and expansionism.

### **Russia’s Contemporary Political Influence and Strategies**

Russia’s sharpest tool in its quest to become a global superpower is its natural gas exports as a geopolitical weapon, particularly in Europe. Some have argued that Russia is an energy superpower (Rutland, 2008) with several states, such as the USA and the German foreign minister, Walter Steinmeier, warning Russia to separate energy from its foreign relations (Shaffer, 2011) with the statement, “Energy must not become the currency of power in international politics”. This clearly depicts Russia’s strong presence as an energy-exporting state and the threat its energy politics pose. “Russia accounted for 48 percent of the increase in world oil supply 1998-2004. Russia accounts for 22 percent of the global output of natural gas and holds 27 percent of proven reserves. It supplies 25 percent of the gas used by the European Union and accounts for 40 percent of the gas that the EU imports. In 2007, Russia was pumping 9.8 million barrels of oil a day, which is about 12 percent of the global supply. Russia accounts for about 20 percent of European oil consumption” (Rutland, 2008). It is with these statistics Russia holds the cards over Europe’s energy supply and is able to use energy politics in order to limit sanctions, create trade opportunities and use overall European energy vulnerability as a tool to fulfil its political agenda.

Europe's reliance on Russian oil and gas has deep historical roots. The foundation of this dependence was

laid in the 1960s with the discovery of major oil and gas fields in Russia, followed by the construction of key pipelines like the Friendship pipeline in 1964 and later the Soyuz, Urengoy, and Yamal pipelines in the 1970s (Rutland, 2008). Over the decades, this dependence has made Europe vulnerable to Russia's strategic energy politics. For instance, projects like the Nord Stream pipelines, designed to transport Russian natural gas to Germany, further entrenched this reliance. Nord Stream 1 began operations in 2012, while Nord Stream 2, completed in 2021, was filled with gas but never commissioned after Germany halted the approval process just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Adomaitis and Ahlander, 2023). Russia has leveraged this dependence as a geopolitical tool, employing a divide-and-conquer strategy by securing bilateral energy deals with individual EU member states. This has not only heightened European reliance on Russian energy but also hindered collective efforts to develop alternative routes for importing oil and gas from Caspian and Central Asian producers (Baran, 2007). Even as some European states, such as Germany, make moves to reduce dependence - by halting Nord Stream 2 and exploring alternative suppliers - Russia's influence persists. For example, intermediaries like Turkey and Azerbaijan often serve as conduits for Russian gas, which re-enters the European market under the guise of diversification. Ironically, this creates a larger market for Russian energy, deepening the very dependence Europe seeks to escape (van Rij, 2024). Thus, while signs of a shift toward reduced reliance on Russian energy are emerging, Europe's long-standing dependence remains a critical element of Russia's geopolitical strategy, shaping energy politics and trade dynamics across the continent.

Comparatively, Russia's use of cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns, as a more hard power approach, follows along the routes of incorporating concepts from hybrid warfare, which combines conventional military force with non-military tactics like cyberattacks and disinformation. Technology renders geo-politics weak, so rather than a geographical approach through contemporary hybrid warfare, Russia attempts to weaponise information for its vested interests. For instance, in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russia employed cyber warfare and disinformation tactics to influence the outcome, marking one of the most significant and successful cyber operations in modern history. Through techniques such as spear-phishing, social media propaganda, and the deployment of internet trolls, Russia sought to manipulate public opinion and undermine trust in the democratic process. These actions not only aimed to secure a presidency more favourable to Russian interests but also to reshape the nature of Russia-USA relations by fostering a dynamic aligned with their mutual vested interests. Several papers analysed Russian strategy during the elections and cited FBI, CIA, and NSI reports as analytical evidence; "Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency... Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump's election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavourably to him" (Jamieson, 2020). By filling social media with anti-Clinton and pro-Trump posts, Russian trolls successfully managed to alter key democratic blocs and win Trump the election. "Russian discourse saboteurs crafted and placed ads on US platforms, organised rallies that would showcase cultural divisions, created imposter sites, and strategically messaged millions on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, and Reddit, among others. With a focus on constituencies whom Donald Trump needed to mobilise, Russian messages stoked fears of the multicultural, multicultural, ecumenical culture that the Clinton Democrats championed and that unified her coalition of blacks, Hispanics, and northern, college-educated whites" (Jamieson, 2020). At the time, non-military tactics like these were relatively uncommon and met with limited defences, highlighting the United States' lack of preparedness against cyber warfare and large-scale disinformation campaigns. The

election served as a stark reminder of the growing dangers posed by cyber threats to national security, demonstrating how such strategies can destabilise political systems without direct military engagement. Weaponising information is a key part of contemporary Russian strategy, with government-controlled media serving as another way to achieve this. “To further propagate his ideas abroad, Putin has allocated significant resources to developing several media outlets and social media platforms... To extend beyond the Russian-speaking world, the Kremlin started the media company Russia Today in 2005, later renamed RT to disguise its affiliation. With an annual budget of over \$300 million USD, RT now broadcasts in 6 languages and has claimed to be YouTube’s most-watched media company with nearly 3 billion views (of which 1.5 billion are from its flagship English-language channel). In 2014, the Russian government also created Sputnik, an organisation that serves as a news agency, news website, and radio broadcast service. The Kremlin-controlled platform promotes a pro-Russian slant on politics, economics, and public opinion, which its regional bureaus gear specifically toward a non-Russian audience” (McFaul, 2019). An example of Kremlin media outlets weaponising information was within the 2016 elections when they released several articles and videos, sometimes in collaboration with “Wikileaks”, supporting an anti-Clinton narrative and painting her in a predominantly negative light. Moreover, these media outlets act as tools to destabilise Western democracies and undermine their political systems. Using non-aligning ideals to Russia's combined political identity, “these Russian state media centre their coverage on explaining the decline of Western states as a consequence of the increase of Islam in politics and society, LGBTI+communities, and migration” (Hellman, 2024, pp.55–99).

### **Responses of NATO and the EU to Russian Actions**

While Russia may be a key chessboard player, some pieces are still vying to win, including various international bodies, particularly the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU) - both of which have responded to Russia’s aggressive geopolitical manoeuvres.

An article by NATO clearly outlines these players’ stance on Russia on one such hard power geopolitical manoeuvre. “Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine has shattered peace and stability in Europe and gravely undermined global security. NATO's Strategic Concept – adopted in 2022 – states that Russia is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. Russia wants to establish spheres of influence and control other countries through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means – including disinformation – against NATO Allies and partners” (NATO, 2022). In response to this classification of Russia, NATO claims that “NATO does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia. The Alliance will continue to respond to Russian threats and actions in a united and responsible way. We are strengthening our deterrence and defence, supporting our partners, and enhancing our resilience. This includes calling out Russia's actions and countering disinformation” (NATO, 2022).

Slowly, since the dismantling of the soviet union, a relationship of mistrust has built between NATO and Russia, with each side citing perspectives on the issue. Many papers have analysed this relationship and found that the result and cause of these increasing tensions are the predominant rises in military spending on both sides, NATO's increased troop deployments in Eastern Europe, following Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and Crimea, joint military exercises, and the reinforcement of collective defence mechanisms under Article 5. As is evident in a paper by Richard Sokolsky on ‘The New Nato-Russia Military Balance: Implications for European Security’ (2017), “a military reform and modernisation program launched in 2008, combined with significant increases in defence spending over the past several years, has improved

the capabilities of Russia's armed forces...in the past decade, Russia has demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to use force as an instrument of its foreign policy, as well as an improved capacity to project military power beyond its immediate post-Soviet periphery...the Kremlin has been conducting a far more aggressive, anti-Western foreign policy, significantly ratcheting up provocative military manoeuvres near NATO members' borders with Russia, intimating nuclear threats, and deploying nuclear-capable missiles in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad". A large majority of this tension emerges from the geopolitical implications of Russia's and NATO's expansionism. As previously mentioned in this paper, one of Russia's main contemporary political strategies is expansionism; to an extent, the same can be said for NATO. NATO's expansionism and recent induction of Finland, which doubled NATO's border with Russia (Kirby and Beale, 2023), led to an increase in the geopolitical risk NATO poses to Russia. "From NATO's vantage point, Russia poses a serious military threat to its eastern flank - and to Euro-Atlantic security..." (Sokolsky, 2017). With ongoing discussions about Ukraine potentially joining NATO, Russia views this as a direct threat to its strategic interests. While NATO's Article 5 obliges collective defence for member states, Ukraine's current conflict with Russia complicates its membership prospects, as NATO generally avoids admitting nations already in active conflicts. The situation underscores the geopolitical tensions between NATO's expansion and Russia's security concerns.

The EU's response to Russia's actions reflects a complex interplay of unity and variation among its member states, shaped by geopolitical and economic realities. The war in Ukraine has both strengthened and challenged the EU's relationship with Russia (Karolewski and Cross, 2016). While the EU is often marked by internal disagreements, especially on foreign policy matters, the invasion of Ukraine prompted an unprecedented level of unity during the initial months. As Giselle Bosse (2023) notes, "The EU agreed on far-reaching economic and financial sanctions... The EU also provided military support to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility (EPF) for the first time in its history. In another unprecedented move, the EU has implemented the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), granting Ukrainian nationals and permanent residents the temporary right to live and work in the EU...Ukraine and Moldova have been offered EU candidacy status". These actions marked a decisive shift in the EU's approach, demonstrating a collective commitment to counter Russian aggression. The unity, however, is not without its limits. Member states have varying relationships with Russia, shaped by differing levels of economic and energy dependency. For instance, while Baltic states advocate for stricter measures against Russia, countries like Hungary have maintained closer ties, complicating consensus on issues like energy sanctions. These divergences underscore the challenges of forming a cohesive long-term strategy, particularly given the EU's reliance on Russian energy supplies, which were significant before the invasion.

The EU's response is driven largely by a realist assessment of the geopolitical threat posed by Russia. As Rabinovych (2022) observes, "The main driver of the EU's response was seen to be the sheer fact of a full-scale military invasion launched on the European continent and the resulting threat to the fundamentals of European security." The invasion underscored the strategic importance of Ukraine as a geographical gateway to Europe, prompting concerns about potential Russian expansion into the continent. Despite this, energy politics remain a critical factor in shaping the EU's approach, reflecting the difficulty of entirely severing ties with a key supplier. Sanctions have further been a cornerstone of the EU's response, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen describing them as the "toughest sanctions the world has ever seen." These measures aim to cripple Russia's financial sector and industrial base, with the European Commission asserting that "Russia's financial sector is on life support" and "Russia's industry is in tatters" (European Commission 2022). However, the effectiveness of these sanctions is tempered by

the varying levels of interdependence among EU states and the globalised nature of the economy. While the sanctions are severe in their intent, their implementation reflects a balancing act between inflicting economic costs on Russia and managing internal EU cohesion.

Ultimately, the EU's response highlights the tension between collective action and individual member-state interests. While the bloc seeks to present a unified front, its internal complexities ensure that its relationship with Russia remains multifaceted and shaped by a combination of solidarity, pragmatism, and geopolitical considerations.

## Conclusion

To gain superpower status, Russia must upset the world order and usurp the United States' superpower status. As a rising power, Russia is attempting to fulfil this goal through various political strategies, a combination of smart power and geopolitical manoeuvres. This research paper analysed how Russia's geopolitical expansion and power dynamics, contemporary political influence strategies, and NATO, the EU, and other international bodies' responses to Russian actions all contribute to and limit Russia's attempt to rise as the only global superpower.

At the base of Russia's political goals is Russian realism, supporting the three main goals of internal, external, and combined political identity, with modern Eurasianism and expansionism as other supporting figures. The implementation of the aforementioned involves Russia's use of energy politics and its natural gas exports as a geopolitical weapon, Russia's use of cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns, and Russia's broader strategy to destabilise Western democracies and undermine their political systems. Russia's strategy moving forward will depend significantly on how nations and international bodies interact and conduct affairs in an increasingly interconnected world. While the foundations of Russia's political strategy are evident, its future actions remain shaped by external political dynamics, including responses from organisations like NATO and the EU. In the geopolitical chess game, it is uncertain whether Russia aims to achieve dominance or simply maintain its position as a formidable player. However, analyses from leading organisations, such as Foreign Policy Magazine, suggest that Russia is a serious contender in the emerging multipolar world order: "Russia is, of course, a potential candidate for great-power status based on its land area, massive natural resources, and huge stockpile of nuclear weapons. The country certainly has an impact beyond its borders..." (Bekkevold, 2023).

So, as the chessboard of international politics continues to shift, Russia's actions will undoubtedly remain a critical factor in defining the contours of global power structures.

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