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Chapter 11

Analysis of Russian Foreign Policy Using Classical, Structural, and Neoclassical Realism Theories, Including the Hegemonic Stability Theory

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Abstract

This paper offers a detailed analysis of Russian foreign policy using Classical, Structural, and Neoclassical Realism, along with Hegemonic Stability Theory. It explores how these theoretical frameworks help explain Russia's international behavior, particularly its relations with global actors and international organizations. From a Classical Realist perspective, Russia sees the state as the primary actor in international relations, with power as the ultimate goal. Its cautious engagement with international organizations and foreign investors reflects its preference for state sovereignty over external influences. This is particularly evident in its strict legislation against NGOs, which Moscow perceives as potential threats to state autonomy. Russia's use of the UN and OSCE to advance its national interests, including vetoing actions like U.S. military interventions, further illustrates its adherence to Classical Realist principles. Structural Realism highlights Russia's behavior in an anarchic international system, where power dynamics dictate state actions. Russia's participation in multilateral organizations like the SCO and BRICS+ can be understood as efforts to counter U.S. hegemony and NATO expansion. Initially focused on security cooperation, the SCO allows Russia to collaborate with China while maintaining influence over Central Asia. This structural balancing is vital for Russia to preserve its great power status despite its declining global influence since the Soviet Union's collapse. Neoclassical Realism offers insights into how domestic factors, such as political leadership and economic interests, shape Russia's external policies. This is particularly evident in its leadership within the CSTO, the CIS, and the EAEU, where Russia uses economic integration to maintain regional dominance. The paper also discusses how Russia's interventions in post-Soviet regions like Ukraine and Georgia reflect a combination of domestic pressures and external security concerns, aligning with Neoclassical Realist principles. Hegemonic Stability Theory complements these realist perspectives by explaining Russia's efforts to challenge the U.S.-dominated global order. Despite economic challenges and limited global influence, Russia seeks to create a multipolar world through alliances in Africa and Asia, balancing the dominant U.S. power. In conclusion, this analysis shows that Russia's foreign policy is deeply rooted in realist thought, with its strategic decisions reflecting a complex interplay of power politics, domestic interests, and efforts to reshape the international order.

Keywords Realism · Neorealism · Neoclassical Realism · Hegemonic Stability Theory · Russian Foreign Policy

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Introduction

The Russian Federation's foreign policy, bearing the weight of historical decisions, has been a significant force in modern international relations. Despite the challenges of contemporary integration and the shadow of US hegemony after the Cold War, the Russian Federation's position as one of the largest economies in the world and its ability to provide nuclear and raw materials have made it a key player in the international system. The realistic approach to global affairs provides an intriguing way of examining Moscow's foreign policy amid globalization and integration processes.

The essay aims to examine the foreign policy of the Russian Federation in the context of different realist approaches, such as neorealism, classical realism, and neoclassical realism. It distinguishes between the structural realist approach, as developed by Waltz, and revanchist rivalry approaches, especially Robert Gilpin's hegemonic stability theory, conflicts when discussing neorealism. This distinction highlights that realism is not always a unified approach in international relations, as different strands focus on various aspects of the theory. However, all realist theories share fundamental assumptions. Therefore, the essay addresses common theses in each realist approach when discussing the external politics of the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federation exemplifies a country historically embracing traditional practical concepts in its foreign policy. Constraints imposed by modern energy distribution and the lack of productivity in the international system have led to a gradual, cautious, and consistent foreign policy approach in Russia, characterized by more neo-realistic and neoclassical practices.

When delving into the intricacies of Russia's foreign policy, it is imperative to grasp the profound significance of classical realism. This methodological approach is a cornerstone in comprehending Russian foreign policy's intricate nature, emphasizing the state's needs and power. While structural realism provides valuable insights into the structural constraints of Russia's foreign policy, it falls short of fully elucidating the dynamics and subtleties of Russian external interference. The theoretical frameworks of hegemonic theory and neoclassical realism have made significant strides, showcasing the evolving nature of state power, enhanced adaptability in global economic organization, and strategic considerations for Russian foreign policy.

Russian Foreign Affairs and The Classical Realism View

Russia's foreign policy is a testament to the fundamental tenets of classical realism. It underscores the pivotal role of the State in global relations, the prioritization of power objectives, the autonomous nature of the state, external policy, and the significance of power in international politics (Donnely, 2006). From the Russian standpoint, foreign relations epitomize the classical, pragmatic view of the state as the primary global actor. Other entities, such as foreign organizations and transnational corporations, are deemed secondary and less significant. International affairs revolve around the interactions between sovereign states. Moscow adopts a cautious stance towards the effective operation of international NGOs and foreign investors within the country. Despite the evolution of Russia's economic cooperation with external partners, its stance remains wary of unregulated activities within Russia, and the Russian state views autonomous foreign entities as potential risks.

The stringent legislation on NGOs adopted during the Putin presidency is one of the most illustrative examples. The need for a rigorous and invasive monitoring procedure on the NGO register is established by stating the state's need to defend against money laundering, militant organizations, and international spy groups using NGO coverage. Financial regulation of their activities, procedural hurdles, and needless paperwork have primarily restricted the independence of the NGOs inside Russia. Foreign investors in Russia face challenges, particularly those still susceptible to Russian economic

interests in energy and raw materials. For instance, the BP-TNK oil joint venture between British and Russian companies encountered issues when Russian authorities tried to control the firm. This was done through British management's visa problems and spy accusations. (Donovan, 2008)

The Russian approach to operating within international organizations aligns with classical realism. Russia has utilized these tools to benefit from the efforts of other countries while avoiding involvement in what it considers its domestic affairs. The Russian approach to the United Nations, especially since the end of the Cold War, indicates this significantly. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia has been able to block international authorization for certain US military operations, such as in the case of the Iraq war (The Guardian, 2008). Furthermore, Moscow's approach to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is noteworthy. Russia has consistently seen the OSCE as the foundation for all future pan-European political and security arrangements since the early 2000s (Morozov, 2005), which gives Moscow an absolute veto over all of its decisions.

At the same time, Russia serves as an excellent example of a basic classical pragmatic theory regarding foreign affairs—anarchy and the resulting priorities of the state. No central global power can impose laws on the democratic state system, so the foreign system operates anarchically. In the context of Russia, the focus is on national priorities, which serve as the primary benchmarks for the success of every sovereign state's foreign policy. This approach has also prevented Russia from engaging in insincere international cooperation. This perspective is evident in various official government documents, including the theory of external politics and the security principle of Moscow. (Russian Federation, 2013; 2014; 2021)

The unpredictable nature of global politics means that each state's foreign policy is self-serving, and every state should prioritize its own safety and interests. Key aspects of Russian foreign policy include a lack of trust in other actors and using rhetoric to defend Moscow's legitimate interests against outside attacks.

A state's military capabilities are crucial as they reflect the practicality and chaos of the world. Therefore, a state's strength, especially its military power, relies on the success of its external policies. This demonstrates the government's commitment to expanding its influence and military strength, which remains a top priority for many traditional realists (Elman, 2007).

The state's military strength has significantly influenced Russian foreign policy. Russia has strategically used its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent, posing threats to deploy weapons of mass destruction in the Kaliningrad territory and Belarus while the US prepares missile defense in central Europe. Despite economic challenges, Russia has continued modernizing its conventional military capabilities. This is evident from the repeated flights of Russian strategic bombers in Canada and the USA, as well as their recent demonstration visits to Russian territories. Russia has showcased its military power in unconventional and sometimes peculiar ways, always with a strategic purpose. According to classical realism in international politics, foreign relations involve dominating other nations, conflicting with significant powers, engaging in zero-sum games, or controlling areas. Moscow has maintained this approach in its external relations. Since the Cold War, Russia has been mindful of its political standing and has used rhetoric about reclaiming its 'rightful place' in global relations. (Gomart, 2008)

Russia expects the US, the EU, and other foreign allies to recognize and address its legitimate interests through joint councils and common meetings. Russia has not stopped its efforts to strengthen the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an area it sees as within its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region. The recent conflicts in Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine showed Moscow's readiness to use military power to maintain its dominance, regardless of international consequences. The Kremlin remains resistant to any foreign intervention, especially from the US (Chadwick et al., 2024).

Moscow's External Policy and The Structural Realism Paradigm

The structural realist approach is crucial in understanding Moscow's external policy. This approach, which underscores the role of instability in international relations and the impact of state structures on external affairs, provides a clear theoretical framework. Waltz's strategy, which focuses on the structure of the international system rather than on individual countries and their internal politics (Waltz, 1993), is particularly relevant in this context. It views the international system's structure as the primary determinant of state behavior on the world stage (Elman, 1996).

Walt's balance of threat theory, a modification of Waltz's balance of power theory, offers a nuanced perspective on state interactions. It separates power from threat, providing a more comprehensive understanding of state behavior. In the balance of power theory, states would balance against others whose military capabilities were increasing, assuming that greater power reflected offensive intentions. However, according to Walt, states do not necessarily balance against others increasing in power; they display offensive intentions against threats (Walt, 1997).

During the Cold War, there was much interest in using foreign politics to explain the division of power between two main groups. Realism was the dominant approach, with discussions focusing on defensive and aggressive perspectives related to military and foreign policies. Defensive realism prioritizes protecting the state without seeking to use force while emphasizing cautious communication with other states. On the other hand, offensive realism suggests that in a world without a central authority, states aim to increase their relative power (Mearsheimer, 1990), including military strength, to thrive in such an environment. (Taliaferro, 2000)

The collapse of the USSR and its subsequent failure had a significant impact on the philosophy of structural realism. It highlighted the theory's limitations in accurately predicting and facilitating peaceful transitions in the global order. This contrasted with the predictions of Kenneth Waltz, who anticipated a more cataclysmic confrontation during the Cold War (Waltz, 1979). With the challenges of structural realism in anticipating the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Erik Jones emphasized that the internal factors leading to the Soviet disintegration were not accounted for in structural realism (Jones, 2009). According to William C. Wohlforth, the collapse of the USSR was not solely due to the decline in Soviet relative power but also because of the loss of confidence in the Soviet elites (Wohlfort, 1994).

Hence, given Russia's proficiency in foreign policy and refusal to accept its current position, realist theory seems to provide a less alarming explanation for the complexities of international affairs in the post-Cold War era. Moscow's strong opposition to the international community's stance, its ambitious global aspirations, and its position post-USSR become evident when observing the Russian Federation's external interventions. After the end of the Cold War, the Russian Federation has shown opposition to US policies. It has accused the US of establishing a global hegemonic authority and suggested a new multipolar system to showcase its legitimacy. Russia's strong disagreement with NATO's intervention in Kosovo and the US's actions in Iraq highlights the fact that Russian objections have been disregarded and its right to be a co-decision maker in global relations has been denied (Oldberg, 2007). But its growing role, especially with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS+ , and its new initiatives in Africa create new challenges to US hegemony.

In addition, structural realism fails to accurately depict the nature of the international system. It neglects to consider domestic factors such as elected leaders, internal political structures, economy, and state ideology. In the case of Russia, this shortcoming seems to stem from a combination of post-Soviet nostalgia and its historical status as one of the world's most effective states. However, this theory also overlooks Russia's economic potential, and this oversight has contributed to a sense of stagnation following the end of the Cold War on a global scale. Politics in Moscow have always been influenced by

a strong central government and Russia's focus on maintaining influence over its neighboring countries (Goble, 2016). This is evident from the centralization efforts during Vladimir Putin's presidency and the recent conflict with Ukraine and Georgia. The foreign policy of the Russian Federation has been marked by strategic and ideological challenges, making it difficult for structural realism to analyze their systems of interpretation accurately.

When we analyze Moscow's ambitions and its resistance to American imperialism, structural realism offers an exciting framework for understanding the constraints placed on Russian foreign intervention after the Cold War. The collapse of the USSR limited Moscow's ability to exert influence globally, confining its role to a regional rather than global player. Despite Russia's assertive propaganda and protests regarding its position on foreign affairs, it is no longer the dominant superpower it once was. Structural realism often emphasizes the tendency of dominant players to control other actors in the system. Moscow asserts its efforts to participate in global decision-making processes. However, it is also true that the influence of the US and China as prominent players in the system cannot be equated with Russia's political, military, or financial capabilities (Korolev, 2022).

The concept of structural realism has helped analyze the distribution of power within the international system. The expansion of NATO raised concerns for Russia as it extended American influence in Europe and brought American political power closer to the Russian border. Another issue is Russia's positioning between the United States and post-Soviet Central Asia, especially Afghanistan. When Vladimir Putin encountered U.S. military bases in the region, it became clear to Moscow that the American presence undermined Russia and its international interests in the previously shared sphere of influence (Kanet & Homarac, 2007). However, the consequences of this US strategy led to a different outcome, ultimately allowing Russian influence in Afghanistan after its withdrawal.

The structural realism framework for Moscow's long-term goals will encounter significant challenges due to the complexities of Russia's foreign policy. There are notable disparities between Russia's relatively modest role in global affairs, its increasing influence at the regional and EU levels, and its ambitions for a more prominent global role. Structural realists, especially offensive structural realists, may propose strategies to strengthen Moscow's position. However, they face difficulty pinpointing the driving forces behind Russian policies beyond the international context (Toft, 2005).

The relationship between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Russia can be best understood through structural realism. Structural realism emphasizes the international system's role in shaping states' behavior, focusing on the distribution of power rather than internal politics. This theory aligns well with how Russia positions itself within the SCO.

Structural realism sees the international system as an anarchic environment where states must maximize their power to guarantee survival (Waltz, 1979). Russia's participation in the SCO is a strategic move in response to the shifting power dynamics in Eurasia. The SCO provides Russia with a means to counter U.S. hegemony and NATO expansion while handling its intricate relationship with China.

The SCO was established in 2001 with a primary focus on security cooperation, particularly in combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Over time, its scope has widened to include economic, political, and military collaboration, positioning it as a counterbalance to Western alliances (SCO, 2024). Through the SCO, Russia aims to extend its influence in Central Asia, historically considered part of its sphere of influence. The organization allows Russia to work with China while preventing Chinese dominance in the region.

The involvement of Russia in the SCO can be explained by structural realism as a means to maintain its great power status (Mearsheimer, 2007). Despite recognizing China’s increasing influence, Russia utilizes the SCO to protect its regional interests, ensuring its position as a key player in shaping Central Asia's political and security landscape. The multilateral structure of the organization enables Russia to

exert influence without directly challenging China, aligning with neorealism's emphasis on balancing power in a multipolar world.

According to structural realism, states operate in an international system characterized by anarchy—no overarching authority is above the state (Layne, 1994). In this context, Russia's participation in BRICS+ can be seen as a strategic move to balance against Western-dominated institutions like NATO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. As a declining global power after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia seeks to counterbalance U.S. hegemony and the unipolar global order (Johnson-Calari et al.,2024). BRICS+, as an alternative multilateral grouping, offers a platform where Russia can amplify its influence, form alliances with other emerging powers, and promote a multipolar world order that better aligns with its national interests.

In structural realism, the concept of balancing is crucial. This is where states form alliances to counter more powerful states or coalitions (Snyder, 1984). Russia sees BRICS+ as a balancing mechanism that helps prevent the domination of any one state, particularly the United States, in global affairs. The collective economic and political strength of BRICS+ allows Russia to promote its interests on the world stage without confrontation with Western powers. Moreover, structural realism highlights that Russia's engagement with BRICS+ is not based on ideological alignment but on pragmatic concerns of maintaining power and ensuring security within the anarchic global system. Within BRICS+, Russia has aligned itself with other member states with shared goals of reforming international institutions to reflect the interests of emerging markets. For example, BRICS countries have consistently advocated for reforms within the IMF and World Bank to provide developing countries with more significant influence. Following unsuccessful negotiations, BRICS took the initiative and established the New Development Bank to solve the ongoing financial crisis and credit system (Prinsloo, 2023). Russia's participation in such efforts underscores its desire to reshape the global order to reflect a more multipolar system in which power is more evenly distributed and less centered on the West.

Russia also sees BRICS+ as an economic opportunity to foster deeper trade relationships and counter the effects of Western sanctions, particularly following its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Structural realism emphasizes how economic and military power are intertwined (Mearsheimer, 2014); Russia's economic ties within BRICS+ enhance its overall geopolitical strength and resilience against Western economic pressures.

Russia's Foreign Policies and Hegemonic Competition

Hegemonic competition theorists, such as Robert Gilpin, highlight the importance of the global system and analyze international affairs based on its dynamics (Gilpin, 1986). They also recognize the system's ability to change dynamically, which contradicts the principles of structural realism (Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006).

Gilpin explains how hegemonic war can lead to structural transformation, resulting in unequal and differentiated power growth among states within the regime. He mentions that a consistent authority structure in society does not necessarily disrupt structural equilibrium, but even a slight shift in power allocation can have an impact (Gilpin, 1988). The regime's structure remains stable until the fundamental interests of the leading power are threatened by excessive rising power due to economic, political, technical, or any other changes. In this sense, the primary role of a second strong state within the regime is to challenge the status quo and contribute to conflict as its strength grows and the leading power weakens (Gilpin, 1988).

The US and the USSR were the two main competitors during the Cold War. Since the USSR's fall, the USA's dominance has been firmly established. It is unlikely that Russia will emerge as a new challenger to the US in the short term. Instead, it will likely seek more cooperation with China against

this unbalanced status quo. Moscow is not actively pursuing imperial ambitions, and it faces challenges such as financial instability, reliance on oil and gas, and worrying demographic trends. The invasion of Ukraine indicates that Russia is still defining its sphere of influence as a regional power. However, this does not necessarily mean that it would undermine other parts of the world as potential targets for further actions, especially in Africa, particularly the Sahel region (Nissen, 2024).

Russia's intervention in the Sahel reflects its strategy to expand its geopolitical influence in regions traditionally dominated by Western powers like France and the United States. As Russia aims to increase its global power and status, it is expanding territorially and politically into regions like Africa, where Western dominance is weakening. In the Sahel, Russia's use of private military contractors (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group and its increasing military and diplomatic ties with countries like Mali can be considered part of a broader strategy to undercut Western influence and establish itself as a major player. Russia's involvement in the Sahel comes with significant economic and military costs, particularly as it seeks to maintain long-term influence and secure economic benefits such as access to natural resources (Ramani, 2021). According to Gilpin's theory, these costs might eventually outweigh the benefits, potentially leading to overextension and the erosion of Russia's power over time.

According to Krasner's theory of "organized hypocrisy," great powers often disregard principles of sovereignty to serve their interests, particularly in regions with weak or unstable governments (Krasner, 1999). Krasner would consider Russia's involvement in the Sahel as an instance of organized hypocrisy, where Russia overlooks traditional ideas of sovereignty to further its agenda. By offering military assistance, such as arms deals and mercenary forces, to governments in Mali and other Sahelian countries, Russia involves itself in the internal affairs of these nations while rationalizing its actions to promote stability and sovereignty.

Krasner's framework explains how Russia manipulates international sovereignty norms to strengthen its position. For example, Russia provides military and political support to authoritarian regimes in the Sahel, helping them maintain power in exchange for loyalty and resource access. This enables Russia to expand its influence while undermining the independence of these states under the guise of respecting sovereignty (Lebovich, 2024).

Kennedy argues in "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" (1987) that empires and great powers decline when they spread their military and economic resources too thin, especially by getting involved in costly foreign ventures that deplete their domestic resources (Kennedy, 1987). From Kennedy's point of view, Russia's participation in the Sahel could be seen as part of a broader trend of military overextension. Despite its re-emergence as a global player, Russia's interventions in various conflict zones, including Syria, Ukraine, and now the Sahel, place significant economic and military burdens. Kennedy would contend that Russia's strategic objectives in the Sahel, such as securing access to resources, increasing diplomatic influence, and undermining Western powers, come with a high cost that could result in imperial overreach. Over time, Russia's financial commitments to military engagements in Africa might outweigh the strategic benefits, especially considering the instability of governments and economies in the Sahel. Moreover, the involvement of Russian private military companies (PMCs) in the region may further strain Russia's resources, adding to domestic economic pressure and potential political repercussions (Sandor, 2024). Kennedy's theory implies that while Russia might enjoy short-term benefits from its Sahelian interventions, such expansion risks pushing its capabilities to the limit, potentially leading to decline.

Hegemonic stability theory remains a relevant framework for analyzing Russia's position and involvement in contemporary international relations. As we move into the 21st century, Moscow should prioritize these external factors. Additionally, a more dynamic international structure would better reflect Moscow's foreign intervention compared to the statistical philosophy of a systemic realistic

approach. Despite the fluid changes in global relations, Moscow's foreign policy will continue to be based on classical conservative foundations.

Russian Foreign Affairs and the Optics of Neoclassical Realism

The comparison between neorealism and neoclassical realism is discussed within contemporary realism. Neorealism focuses on interpreting an institutional system, while neoclassical realism takes a state-level approach to foreign policy analysis (Rose, 1998). However, some neoclassical realists fail to recognize that external (structural) and internal (domestic) influences must be analyzed separately. They aim to understand a state's foreign policy by considering both the international structure and domestic factors, which could either strengthen or weaken the influence of systemic determinants (Kitchen, 2010).

The significance of domestic factors, mainly according to classical realism, and the challenges leaders face when deciding on a state's foreign policy have been somewhat referenced. However, neoclassical realists focus more on the state's perception of power and the motivations of its adversaries. They also consider the government's ability to rally public support for short-term objectives and adjust to shifting national aspirations and priorities. Additionally, they acknowledge the possibility of limited cooperation among member states under specific conditions (Legro & Moravcsik, 1999).

In contrast to other philosophies, the neoclassical approach critiques the questioning and opposing of a normative realistic perspective. However, it assists in understanding Russia's foreign policy by providing an analytical framework for examining the structural factors that influence state external policy. Given the diverse interest groups involved in Russian domestic policy, such as military lobbying, oligarchs, the raw materials industry, and different ruling class factions, interpreting Russian foreign policy without considering its local determinants can be challenging.

Neo-classical realism is useful for understanding the various roles played by Moscow. At different times, Moscow considers Russian interests in its relationships with world leaders such as the USA, leaders of the European Union, and even in dealings with CIS states. Russia is particularly concerned about the impact of globalization on its economy and society, which has limited its competitiveness in global economic development. As a result, Moscow has not been actively involved in broader international interaction. It has mainly focused on traditional, realistic foreign policies, especially its "politically responsive" economic sectors like oil and commodities (Sakwa, 2007).

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a regional military alliance led by Russia. It includes post-Soviet states such as Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (CSTO, 2024). We can use the neoclassical realism framework to understand why the CSTO is vital for Russia. Neoclassical realism considers external factors (like the anarchic international system) and internal factors (such as political leadership, state capacity, and national interests) to explain a state's behavior.

Neoclassical realism expands upon structural realism by recognizing that domestic factors affect how states react to the limitations and opportunities presented by the international system (Lobell et al., 2009). In Russia, the CSTO is critical for several reasons linked to external security issues and internal dynamics, such as the leadership's aspiration to maintain influence over the post-Soviet region.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, Russia's main reason for maintaining the CSTO is its security concerns and the need to control its surrounding geopolitical area. The CSTO allows Russia to coordinate security policies in a region crucial for its national defense. It is a buffer against threats like terrorism, regional conflicts, and NATO expansion (Tsygankov, 2012). By formalizing security cooperation with former Soviet republics, Russia ensures stable borders and collective defense against external threats, particularly from the West or Islamist movements in Central Asia.

Neoclassical realism emphasizes the significance of power distribution in the international system and includes Russia's leadership's interpretation of external threats and opportunities. The CSTO serves as Russia's counterbalance to NATO, and Moscow sees the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe as a direct threat to its security interests. Through the CSTO, Russia solidifies its military presence and influence in its neighboring regions, preventing NATO from expanding its influence into the former Soviet sphere (Monaghan, 2017). Russia's leadership, particularly under Vladimir Putin, considers the maintenance of the CSTO to be crucial in safeguarding the country's long-term geopolitical position.

Neoclassical realism highlights how domestic politics and elite perceptions influence a country's foreign policy (Rose, 1998). For Russia, maintaining control over the post-Soviet region is a strategic necessity and is tied to national identity and historical legacy. The Russian leadership sees the CSTO as part of its broader strategy to reaffirm Russia's status as a significant power and to prevent the decline of its influence in the area. Russian leaders have consistently worked to maintain the country's dominance in Eurasia, and the CSTO serves as the institutional framework for projecting this influence in a coordinated and legitimate manner.

Neoclassical realism underscores the role of the CSTO in maintaining order within allied states. Russia has effectively utilized the CSTO to ensure stability in its neighboring nations, recognizing that instability could directly impact Russia. For instance, Russia has leveraged CSTO mechanisms to help resolve political crises in member states like Kyrgyzstan. By promoting stability among its CSTO partners, Russia aims to mitigate the risk of political turmoil, such as color revolutions or extremist uprisings, which could threaten its own regime's security.

Russia sees Armenia's membership in the CSTO as crucial for maintaining its influence in the South Caucasus, a region necessary for its geopolitical interests. However, Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has strained this relationship. Armenia is seen as an essential ally for Russia in the South Caucasus, providing a strategic military base through the 102nd Russian military base in Gyumri. Through the CSTO, Russia maintains influence in Armenia, countering the influences of other powers like NATO and Iran However, Russia also maintains robust economic, energy, and political ties with Azerbaijan. In this context, the CSTO serves as a crucial platform for Russia to ensure that countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan do not succumb to the influence of other powers such as NATO or the European Union (Bellamy, 2024).

During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Armenia sought support from the organization. Russia played a more active role than the CSTO but took a measured approach. Moscow helped broker a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan but refrained from direct involvement on Armenia's behalf. This cautious stance led to questions in Armenia about the CSTO's effectiveness in defending its members against external threats. Russia's approach can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Azerbaijan holds significant strategic importance for Russia, especially in energy and trade, making it essential for Russia to maintain balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Secondly, the conflict occurred in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh rather than on Armenia's recognized territory. This complicated the CSTO's potential involvement, as the treaty only requires defense against external aggression on a member's established territory (CSTO, 2012).

After the war, Armenia expressed frustration with the CSTO and Russia’s perceived lack of support during the conflict. This dissatisfaction triggered debates within Armenia about the value of CSTO membership and Russia’s reliability as an ally. Nonetheless, Russia has worked to manage Armenia’s grievances by deploying peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh and maintaining its military base in Armenia, signaling that it still views Armenia as a strategic partner within the CSTO framework. However, this process did not go well because Russian peacekeepers withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh (Osborn & Bagirova, 2024), and Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan declared his intention to leave the CSTO with

the following statement: "We will go out. We will decide when to exit" (Armenpress, 2024). In addition, there was a high-level joint meeting between Armenia, the US, and the EU to maintain the resilience of Armenia (EU, 2024a), along with some high-level US visits to Armenia (US Embassy, 2024). In response to these deteriorating developments, Russia offered Armenia the possibility of remaining in the CSTO and promised economic relations for domestic and external control in the region (Sputnik, 2024).

The CIS was founded in 1991 and serves as a regional platform for Russia to maintain political, cultural, and economic ties with former Soviet republics. From a neoclassical realist perspective, Russia's involvement in the CIS is driven by structural and domestic motivations. The CIS allows Russia to influence the post-Soviet space without directly confronting the West. Structurally, the CIS serves as a mechanism for Russia to maintain regional hegemony and counterbalance the influence of external powers like NATO and the European Union (Tsygankov, 2012). Russia views the CIS as a soft power tool to ensure political loyalty among its neighboring states, thereby preventing them from drifting into the orbit of Western alliances (Ambrosio, 2016).

Internally, Russia's leadership sees the CIS as essential for preserving its historical and cultural ties with the former Soviet republics. Russian leaders, particularly under Vladimir Putin, viewed the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a loss of geopolitical status. The CIS provides a means of maintaining a semblance of the former Soviet empire's influence (Monaghan, 2017). This reflects the importance of national identity in shaping Russia's foreign policy choices under neoclassical realism.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was established in 2015 to create a single market among Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Russia has been the primary driving force behind the EAEU, as it sees it as crucial for consolidating its economic and geopolitical influence in the region. The EAEU allows Russia to strengthen its regional economic influence and counterbalance the European Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative (Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020). According to neoclassical realism, Russia uses the EAEU to ensure that its neighboring states remain economically dependent on Moscow, thereby preventing them from integrating too closely with Western economies or China. This economic leverage helps Russia secure its geopolitical dominance in the post-Soviet space.

The EAEU is closely linked to Russia's goal of boosting its global standing and maintaining its position as a significant power. Russia's leadership sees the EAEU as a means of advancing a multipolar world order in which Russia holds a central role. Establishing an integrated economic bloc strengthens Russia's ability to act as a dominant force in the region. It presents a vision of a "Greater Eurasia" that competes with Western and Chinese influence (Monaghan, 2017). This aligns with neoclassical realism's emphasis on how internal political dynamics impact foreign policy decisions.

Neoclassical realism emphasizes the link between foreign policy and internal regime stability. Russia's leadership uses the CIS and the EAEU to validate its domestic authority. It is a protector of Russian-speaking populations and a guarantor of regional stability. For example, Russia has portrayed its leadership within the CIS and the EAEU as essential for defending ethnic Russians in neighboring states, which helps to bolster domestic support for Putin's administration (Tsygankov, 2012). Furthermore, the EAEU's economic integration serves Russia's domestic economic objectives by opening markets and reducing reliance on Western economies. This has become particularly important after Western sanctions were imposed between 2014-2024 (EU, 2024b).

Conclusion

Understanding Russia's foreign policy can be challenging due to the complex interplay of various factors. This includes historical remnants from the Cold War era and the Soviet Union and ongoing domestic political and economic transformations. However, the realist perspective in international relations offers a practical framework for understanding Russia's foreign activities within the context

of current globalization and integration processes. Fundamental principles of classical realism have consistently shaped Russia's foreign policy, focusing on the state's interests, influence, and military capabilities. This has remained unchanged in the post-Cold War dynamics of international affairs, making classical realism the primary instrument for explaining Russia's external policy.

The study of Russian international intervention should not only consider a classical realist viewpoint but also consider globalization and regional integration processes. Despite being hesitant and slow, developments in Russian foreign policy have had to consider the constraints placed on the state by the current power distribution in the world order since the Cold War, even though Moscow has lost much of the dominant role of the former USSR. Structural realism is a critical way to understand these changes as it focuses on the international community, but none of these theories fully capture the complexity of Moscow's external actions.

Due to the limitations of its previous political and military strategies, Russia has relied more on its economic and natural resource capabilities than solely on military power. This has led to the emergence of neorealist and neoclassical realist theories as valuable tools for analyzing the changing dynamics of state control and adaptability in the international arena. Neoclassical realism is particularly noteworthy as it highlights the significance of domestic foreign policy considerations in Russia, considering the influence of various domestic actors and the features of Russian politics. Both neorealism and neoclassical realism offer valuable insights, with the latter showing increasing explanatory power. It should be noted, however, that these theories remain firmly grounded in the tradition of classical realism when applied to Russia's external policy.

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