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Predicting Great Power War in a Multipolar World: A Structural Realist Framework

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Abstract: This article employs structural realism indicators to predict the likelihood of a great power war in today's multipolar world. Focusing on key indicators such as changes in the balance of power, alliance systems, military expenditure, and the intensity of competition over strategic resources and regions, the analysis aims to establish a theoretical foundation for assessing the risk of conflict among major powers in Europe and beyond. Drawing on historical precedents and contemporary geopolitical trends, the study evaluates the dynamics of international relations through the structural realist framework. By examining the evolving power structures and strategic behaviors of major states, the article seeks to identify patterns that may indicate an increased risk of great power conflicts. The multifaceted approach integrates both historical insights and current realities, offering a comprehensive perspective on the potential triggers and dynamics of great power wars in the complex landscape of a multipolar world. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the structural factors that may influence the emergence of conflicts among major powers, providing valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and analysts grappling with global security

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challenges and provides a deeper analysis of the security implications for the Baltic region.

Keywords: Structural realism; international history; great power war; balance of power; multipolarity; security dilemma; Baltic Security

Introduction

> In the anarchic world of international politics, it's better to be Godzilla than Bambi.
> John J. Mearsheimer (2001 p. 296))

> The statesman who knowing his instrument, to be ready and seeing war inevitable, hesitates to strike first is guilty of a crime against his country.
> Carl Von Clausewitz. *On War*

Two years of devastating war between Russia and Ukraine have instilled fear among European politicians – from Stockholm and Berlin to Moscow – of a full-scale war in Europe. The UK Minister of Defense unambiguously stated that Europe is 'moving from a postwar to a prewar world'. In the background looms the concern that Russia seems to be turning the tide Ukraine, combined with a growing panic over the prospect of US isolationism if Trump wins the upcoming presidential elections (Sabbagh, 2024). Europe appears to be at the precipice of yet another great power war, only around 80 years after the last great power war's conclusion in 1945.

Great power wars can have profound and far-reaching consequences for affected nations and societies, most vividly witnessed in the total wars of WWI and WWII. These conflicts marked pivotal moments in history with lasting impacts on the entire world in terms of human suffering and economic devastation. Furthermore, great power wars can cause structural changes to the international system of states. In the aftermath of WWI, for example, the

world witnessed the collapses of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires.

The war in Ukraine has taken a dangerous turn in recent months. A sharp increase in economic and military aid from NATO countries to Ukraine, coupled with discussions about stationing NATO troops on the ground to counter recent Russian battlefield victories, confirms Russia's long-held fears about Ukraine potentially joining NATO. This is perceived in Moscow as an existential threat. This escalating tension, fueled by Russia's repeated threats to use nuclear weapons, raises the chilling possibility of a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia, a scenario that could trigger a wider war potentially surpassing the devastation of the 20th century's total wars.

Predicting the outbreak of a great power war is a complex and challenging endeavour. In recent years, several initiatives and projects have examined historical case studies to identify patterns and dynamics that may contribute to the escalation of tensions between rising and established powers. Organisations like the Eurasia Group, Stratfor, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) provide geopolitical forecasting and risk assessments, considering intrastate and interstate conflicts across the world based on complex quantitative and qualitive methodologies for their governmental and non-governmental clients. Furthermore, defense and security think tanks such as the RAND Corporation and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) undertake research and analysis on security and defense issues, including the potential for great power wars.

However, none of the above-mentioned frameworks are grounded in any specific theory of international relations. While some initiatives, such as the Harvard Thucydides Trap Project led by political scientist Graham Allison, incorporates realist notions of power dynamics and competition, the analysis goes beyond structural realism. It includes factors such as decision-making processes and individual agency, allowing room for cooperation and peaceful solutions through diplomacy and strategic adjustments (Harvard University

Thucydides Trap Project). Structural realists like Mearsheimer sees limited prospects for peaceful accommodation due to the structural pressures of the system.

This article will present and explain a framework to assess the risk of great power war in a multipolar world, consisting of five key Great Power War indicators and their corresponding hypotheses and assumptions. The analytical framework is grounded in the international relations theory of structural realism and key variables that determine the outbreak of war, such as the distribution of power between states and alliances. Structural realism, perhaps more than any other international relations theory, claims to be informed by practices and derived from a historical pattern of behaviour of great powers in the international system of states. For that reason, each indicator will be explained and substantiated by historical examples of great power wars. Finally, the essay endeavours to put the indicators to the test by assessing the risk of a great power war in Europe in the near future.

The theoretical frameworks provide a structured and systematic way of understanding and analysing great power competition and conflict by identifying and understanding the root causes of international conflicts, including the factors that contribute to the outbreak of wars. By examining historical patterns and systemic forces, these theories offer insights into the underlying dynamics that may lead to conflict. The theories therefore provide a context for understanding the behaviour of states and great powers within the international system. They offer lenses through which to interpret the actions and motivations of states, helping to predict how nations might respond to certain stimuli or changes in the global environment (Smith, 2013, pp. 8-9).

The purpose of the framework is to help policymakers anticipate the consequences of their actions and make informed choices that align with their broader strategic goals. More concretely, it will assist in assessing the risk of great power conflicts by providing a systematic approach to evaluating factors, such as changes in power distributions, alliance structures, the impact of emerging powers, and resource competition. The framework also enables analysts, governments, and non-governmental stakeholders such as peace

activists and humanitarian organisations to identify potential flashpoints and areas of instability, thus allowing them to prepare consequent actions and response plans.

Structural realism and its theoretical underpinnings

Structural realism or neorealism, a dominant theory in international relations, argues that the structure of the international system, particularly the distribution of power, is the key driver of state behaviour. In this anarchic system, absent a central authority, states are the primary actors, and each of them are focused on their own security and survival in a system of self-help (Mearsheimer (2001) p.32-34).

Neorealism highlights two key features of the international system: the distribution of power and inherent uncertainty about other states' intentions. This constant tension fuels an 'unresolvable security dilemma.' All states possess military capabilities, creating a potential threat to their neighbours. Powerful states enjoy greater security and influence while weaker states are more vulnerable. Given the anarchic system and a lack of trust, states can never be certain if the military buildup of another state is defensive or offensive (Mearsheimer (2010) p. 381-396). This constant fear of potential aggression drives states, especially in the pursuit of their primary goal of survival, to prioritise their own security. Furthermore, a core assumption of neorealism is that great powers are rational actors who approach geopolitics strategically, aiming to maximise their chances of survival in the international system. Therefore, according to structural realists, states naturally seek to maintain or achieve a balance of power to prevent any one state from becoming dominant and threatening the security of others.

Structural realists, however, disagree on how much power a state needs to maximise its security. Defensive realists, like Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, and Jack Snyder see states as primarily concerned with maintaining the status quo. They believe states seek enough power to secure their position within the system and preserve the balance of power. They argue that attempts to upset

this balance by revisionist powers will be met with counterbalancing measures from others (Waltz (2000) p. 26-28). However, offensive realists, most notably John Mearsheimer, disagree. They believe great powers naturally strive for regional dominance. By achieving hegemony, they eliminate future threats from rivals and maximise their long-term security. This pursuit of relative power, even at the cost of upsetting the balance, is central to their worldview (Mearsheimer (2001) p. 211).

Finally, structural realists emphasise power balancing as a critical strategy for states, taking several forms. States may forge alliances with others to counter a rising power, creating a united front. Alternatively, they might choose 'buck-passing,' relying on others to take the lead in balancing efforts while they focus on their own immediate security. Geographical factors can influence this choice, with states closer to a threat more likely to take a proactive stance. Additionally, some second-tier powers might find 'bandwagoning' attractive, aligning themselves with a stronger power to gain protection and potentially share in the spoils of victory (Mearsheimer (2010) p. 79-80).

In this context, war indicators take on an added significance as they reflect the underlying power dynamics among states that contribute to the potential for conflict. Societal and cultural factors, on the other hand, are viewed as secondary to the distribution of power. While such characteristics can shape state behavior to some extent, realists argue that they are ultimately subordinate to the pursuit of power and security. For that reason, the great power indicators presented here exclusively pertain to the balance of power in the international system of states (Mearsheimer, 2010, pp.381-396).[1]

Today, the international system of states is multipolar, where power is distributed among multiple major actors or states, and no single state or alliance dominates the others. As opposed to unipolar or bipolar systems, the multipolar system will see greater imbalances of powers since an increase in

[1] Political decision-making theory can provide micro foundations for structural realism by examining how individual leaders interpret and respond to systemic pressures. It explores how decision-makers perceive threats, calculate costs and benefits, and navigate the constraints of the international structure. More on this in Robert Jervis 'Perception and Misperception in International Politics' (1976)

the number great powers means an increase in the number of relevant actors, and changing capabilities and intentions also increases the chance of miscalculations that can lead to war (Mearsheimer, 2010, pp.381-396). Unbalanced multipolarity increases the risk of war since power imbalances within the system tend to increase tensions and competition as states seek to redress perceived inequities or counter the influence of dominant powers. The current great powers in the international system are the United States, China, and Russia in sequence of power. Since the 2011 war in Libya, the two latter powers have developed into strategic partners in military, political, and economic terms (Kvernmo, 2019, p.17) that could return the world to the Cold War era of bipolarity. This means that the United States and the other members of the international system need to assess and monitor the China and Russia individually as well as their combined forces.

Great Power War Indicators and the Risk of War in Europe

Below, each of the five great power war indicators will be presented and analysed through the lens of structural realism theory and informed by historical case studies. Furthermore, the risk of a great power war in Europe will be assessed based on the current geopolitical situation in Europe. The risk analysis exercise also seeks to demonstrate how the framework can be applied, using the risk values of low, medium, and high risks.

GPW Indicators 1	**Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe**
Timeframe before a rising power surpasses a regional hegemon	High Risk

Hypothesis: Structural realists emphasise the distribution of power and the relative capabilities of states as key drivers of international relations. The relative power of the individual states – a product of military and economic power and population – varies over time and is constantly being monitored by

the other states. For some structural realists, power transitions and the rise and fall of great powers in particular are seen as central factors in shaping the geopolitical landscape and influencing the likelihood of war.

According to power transition theory, major wars and conflicts are more likely to occur during periods of power transition between great powers. The more imminent a rising power is to overtake an existing hegemon, the higher the likelihood of preemptive strikes from either the revisionist (rising) power or the status quo (hegemonic) power. This theory suggests that as a rising power gains strength and approaches parity or surpasses the dominant power, the potential for conflict and preemptive actions increases since the fear of being overtaken, coupled with the desire to maintain or expand influence, can lead to a heightened risk of conflict as both powers maneuver to secure their positions in the international system (Organski, 1958).

Graham Allison argues that the rising power, motivated by its growing strength and aspirations for a larger global role, challenges the dominant power's position and disrupts the established hierarchy. Allison analysed sixteen cases in which a major rising power has threatened to displace a major ruling power in the last 500 years and concluded that twelve of these transitions lead to war (Allison, 2017). His research has been further developed and expanded in the ongoing Harvard Thucydides Trap Project (Harvard Thucydides Trap Project). The case studies below illustrate how rising powers can lead to great power wars.

Case Studies: WWI and WWII

In the years leading up to the outbreak of WWI, Germany's rapid economic growth and military buildup threatened the existing hegemony of the United Kingdom. The increasing strength of Germany, combined with its aspiration for a larger global role – a place in the sun – caused alarm not only in London but in the other major capitals in Europe (Morris and Murphy, 2004, pp. 111 and 114-5). Fearing Germany's rise and the perceived direct challenge to its status as a global power, The United Kingdom sought forge alliances and construct preemptive strategies to prevent the rise of Germany and maintain its dominant position.

Prior to World War I, Germany experienced significant and higher relative economic growth compared to their European rivals of Russia, France, and the United Kingdom. Germany's industrial sector expanded rapidly, especially in sectors such as steel, chemicals, and machinery. Germany overtook the United Kingdom in its relative share of European wealth in 1903; however, in terms of actual military power, France and Germany dominated the European land war theater (Kennedy, 1988, pp.254-9). Still, while their standing armies were of similar size, the German (as opposed to the French) reservist armies were combat ready and Germany counted on its 'superior general staff' and advantages in heavy artillery (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.302). The British army – as opposed to the formidable Royal Navy – was too small and weak to affect the balance of powers on the continent, and Russian forces, although boasting the largest standing army, was fraught with internal weaknesses that became painfully evident in the humiliating defeat against the Japanese army and navy in the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-05 (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 302).

By 1913, Germany was the largest steel-producing country in the world. As a rising power, Germany significantly increased its military spending leading up to World War I. Germany's military spending outpaced that of both France and Russia. The German government allocated a considerable portion of its budget to military expenditures, aiming to enhance its military capabilities (Kennedy, 1988, p.273).

Germany's rise as an economic powerhouse and its increasing military capabilities contributed to the shifting power dynamics in Europe and played a significant role in the geopolitical tensions that eventually led to the outbreak of World War I. Germany – as a revisionist power trapped between the United Kingdom and France to the West and Russia to the East – sought to reshape the geopolitical landscape in Europe to better reflect their growing capabilities and interests, leading to a direct confrontation over spheres of influence, resources, and strategic interests in Africa and the Middle East before the great power war broke out in Europe in 1914 (Carr, 1939, p.72).

20 years after the end of WWI and the unsuccessful attempt by Wilhelmine Germany and its allies to expand East, South, and West, the rise of Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler threatened the established powers in Europe once again, particularly the United Kingdom and France. Germany's aggressive expansionist policies and growing military capabilities instilled fears in Great Britain and France that again generated a power transition dynamic, leading to the outbreak of World War II as these dominant powers sought to prevent Germany's further rise and maintain their own positions. This time around, however, the former entente allies decided on the strategy of buck passing until Nazi Germany annexed all of Czechoslovakia in 1939 and both France and Great Britain opted for a balancing strategy drawing the red line in the sand on Germany's border with Poland (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 307-318).

At this point in time, Germany's economic and military might be that of a potential hegemon in Europe and it was not surprising that war broke out the in 1939 when Germany armed forces were superior to those of France. The Soviet Union, however, continued a buck passing that was formalised in the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact that divided Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence (Beevor, 2012, pp.17-21).

The historical examples of these wars suggest that in an unbalanced multipolar world, the greater the threat of imminent takeover by a revisionist power, the higher the likelihood of preemptive strikes from either the revisionist or status quo power.

Case Study: the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904-05)

The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 is an example of a power transition conflict in East Asia during the late 19th century. As Japan's rapid modernisation and rise as a regional power threatened China's position as the dominant power in the region, tensions escalated, resulting in a conflict between the two nations. Japan's victory in the war marked a significant shift in the power balance in East Asia.

Japan's leaders believed that challenging China's dominance in the region was necessary for Japan to secure its own national interests and ensure its continued growth as a major power (Pyle p.196). Meanwhile, China's relative decline in power – largely attributed to foreign interventions in the period popularly referred to as 'the century of humiliation' and its inability to effectively modernise made it vulnerable to Japanese expansionism (Boyle, 1993).

The immediate cause of the Sino-Japanese war was competing territorial claims in Korea, which was considered a vassal state of China. Japan saw Korea as a crucial buffer zone and sought to prevent Chinese influence and potential intervention there (Boyle, 1993). The war resulted in a decisive victory for Japan, and the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed in 1895, ended the conflict. As a result of the treaty, China recognised Korea's independence, ceded Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands to Japan, and granted Japan various trade and territorial concessions. However, following diplomatic intervention by Russia, along with Germany and France, Japan was forced to return the Liaodong Peninsula to China, which had been ceded to Japan in the treaty. This intervention frustrated Japan's territorial ambitions, raised tensions with Russia and convinced many in Tokyo that they had to bide their time develop their military might until they could match Western powers (Toshiro, 2004).

Nevertheless, the war marked a shift in the regional power balance and set the stage for Japan's further expansion and influence in the early 20th century and following the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-05, Japan became a regional hegemon in East Asia. While China was a declining power and Japan a rising power, both Russia and Japan were rising powers that sought to expand their influence and territories in East Asia. Russia was primarily interested in securing its maritime access to the Pacific Ocean and expanding its sphere of influence in China's northeastern provinces and Manchuria. Japan, on the other hand, was focused on asserting its position as a regional power and gaining control over Korea, Manchuria, and other parts of China that were considered strategic buffer zones for its security (Bragg, 2021).

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War was a significant turning point in the region's power dynamics. The war showcased Japan's modernised military and naval capabilities and established Japan as the first Asian country to defeat a major European power in a modern war (Bragg, 2021).

These examples demonstrate how the perceived imminence of a rising power overtaking an existing hegemon can increase the likelihood of preemptive strikes or aggressive actions from both the rising and status quo powers. The more immediately a rising power is perceived to overtake an existing hegemon, the more likely that war will break out between these powers.

Critics of the Power Transition Theory

Critics of the theory have highlighted overly simplistic assumptions about power dynamics. Gilpin underscores the absence of factors such as economic independence, the impact of ideology, and the influence of international institutions in the analysis (1981). Other critics have enumerated instances where power transitions have not led to war. Richard Ned Lebow and Benjamin Valentino produced one of the best-known critical assessments, arguing that basically none of the great power wars they surveyed was generated by a power transition. One, often referred to, example is the US–UK relationship from the late 19th century through the mid-20th: The United States overtook the United Kingdom as the world's leading power, but the two cooperated to manage the international system rather than falling into a rivalry. To understand this anomaly, one must analyse the backdrop of the shifting geopolitical dynamics and emerging global threats in Europe before World War I. While tensions between the two powers spiked in periods, notably during the Venezuela-Guyana crisis in 1895-96 and the Alaskan border dispute (1899), these matters were resolved through arbitration. The German naval buildup starting in 1890s threat represented a more direct and imminent threat to the British supremacy of the seas. Therefore, Britain backed down from the Guyana and Alaskan claims, tacitly accepting US hegemony in the America (Zakaria, 1999, pp.145-46).

Another example that contradicts the theory is an example from the late 15th century, as Spain was about to overtake Portugal as the most powerful nation

in the region. Through papal intervention the two nations, navigated complex diplomatic and geopolitical considerations that ultimately prevented them from going to war. The Pope, Alexander VI played a crucial role in mediating disputes between European powers during this period (Harvard University Thucydides Trap Project, Portugal-Spain Case study). One could argue that the Pope temporarily and spatially suspended the anarchic state of the international system when he, as an impartial arbiter for the two Catholic nations, settled the dispute in the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 due to the effective and devastating threat of excommunication.

GPW Indicator 1 and the Risks of Great Power War in Europe

Russia, as the eighth largest economy in the world, is nowhere close to challenge the United States. However, since 2011, Russia has gradually developed a strong and deep strategic partnership/alliance with China that needs to be included in the balance of power calculations in both Europe and Asia (Kvernmo, 2019, pp. 9-11). Although the United States initiated sanctions to slow down Chinese growth in the short run, the United States is struggling to balance (with its allies) against Russia in Europe and China in the East.

Russia's strategic ally China will overtake the US economy in 13 years and become the largest economy on earth. According to the Centre for Economic and Business Research (CEBR), China is forecasted to take over the US economy in 2037, which is delayed from the earlier forecast of 2028. However, there are several structural challenges in the economy, such as demographic and the middle-income trap, which has led IMF to downgrade the growth projections of the country. Nevertheless, in terms of Purchasing Power Parities (PPP), China surpassed the United States in 2017, and Russia became Europe's largest and the world's fifth largest economy in 2022 (CEBR, 2023. p.10 and 172). In other words, China as a rising power has already overtaken the US in terms of PPP and will soon do so also measured in dollar terms.

Given the strategic partnership/alliance between Russia and China, reinforced by the 2022 war in Ukraine, the joint military and economic power of these

two nations necessarily affects the balance of power calculations in the entire Eurasian region (Global Firepower, 2024). The risk of preemptive strikes between revisionist and status quo powers in Europe is therefore high. The fact that the United States and NATO allies are providing substantial military and economic support to Ukraine and its war against invading Russia does not only raise questions if the former countries are de facto belligerents in the war but increases the likelihood of a spillover to the territory of European NATO members as well.

The imminence of a rising power overtaking a regional hegemon is an important factor in predicting the outbreak of great power wars. Another indicator, however, will allow for greater precision in predicting the timeframe of such an occurrence. Historically there are many examples where expected future relative power decline has induced great powers to initiate war while the chances of success are still relatively favourable.

GPW Indicators 2	**Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe**
The level of expected future relative decline of the hegemon and/or rising power(s)	High Risk

Hypothesis: Structural realists argue that states are primarily concerned with relative gains in power or resources compared to other states. When states perceive that their relative power or influence is declining, they may be motivated to take actions, including engaging in conflict, to prevent or reverse this decline before its power wanes any further. The expectation of diminishing power can induce a great power to engage in military aggression or initiate conflict while it still possesses a relatively favourable balance of power and before this window of opportunity closes, making the prospect of victory more difficult or unlikely. Furthermore, the risk of war is even higher when expected relative decline is combined with the real or perceived isolation or containment efforts from potential adversaries attempting to prevent its rise. The declining power may then initiate military action to disrupt such

containment or isolation efforts and attempt to regain or maintain influence (Levy, 1987, p.89).

Case Study: Germany's Aggression in World War II

The expectation of further decline and the desire to regain lost territories and resources motivated Germany to initiate military aggression and launch World War II. The Nazi regime faced significant economic challenges, including the aftermath of the Great Depression and the constraints imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler and his supporters believed that aggressive expansionism and acquiring new territories would provide access to resources, markets, and economic opportunities that could alleviate Germany's economic struggles (Henig, 1985, p.30).

Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime in Germany forecasted Germany's future relative decline in power in the 1940s. The Hossbach memorandum from 1937 quoted Hitler as stating, 'Our relative strength would decrease in relation to the rearmament which would by then have been carried out by the rest of the world.' Therefore, he argued that Germany would need to initiate the war before the 1943-45 period beyond which could be considered a 'waning point of the regime' (Hossbach memorandum).

Hitler and the Nazi regime saw Germany's future relative decline in power as a pressing issue that needed to be addressed through military means. They aimed to overturn what they perceived as the unjust outcomes of World War I, regain lost territories, and restore Germany's position as a dominant force in Europe. They assessed that the other major powers, such as the United Kingdom and France, were not prepared or willing to confront Germany militarily early on, which encouraged them to act swiftly and aggressively (ibid.).

There is ample evidence to suggest that Nazi Germany towards the end of the 1930s was preparing for war and there was an urgency to act before the

Western powers and Soviet Union. Simultaneously in East Asia, Japan was faced by a similar predicament.

Case Study: Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Japan faced the prospect of relative decline compared to Western powers, particularly the United States, which imposed an embargo on strategic resources and oil.

The United States demanded the Japanese withdrawal from China as a condition to relax the economic embargo, and faced with the need to secure resources for its military and industrial ambitions, Japan launched a preemptive strike on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941, seeking to gain an advantage and prevent further containment (Saburo, 1968, p. 133).

President Hara explained Japan's option in the Privy Council 2 November 1941: 'It is impossible, from the standpoint of our present political situation and of our self-preservation, to accept all the American demands. On the other hand, we cannot let the present situation continue. If we miss the present opportunity to go to war, we will have to submit to American dictation. Therefore, I recognize that it is inevitable that we must decide to start a war against the United States. I will put my trust in what I have been told, namely that things will go well in the early part of the war; and that although we will experience increasing difficulties as the war progresses, there is some prospect of success.' Hence the attack on Pearl Harbor was a rationally calculated risk that a great power was willing to assume to break with the perceived encirclement by hostile Western powers and where the only other option was the inevitable slow decline if Japan accepted the US demands (Storry, 1979).

The economic embargo placed on Japan as a result of its expansion into Indochina would be fatal in the long term for Japan. The Japanese could not sustain the war in China if their key war supplies were cut off. Therefore, a war of conquest to gain and ensure resources from the European colonies seemed to be the only option. However, opinion in Japan was divided on the question of expanding the war. Some argued that Japan could withdraw its

forces from Indochina and thus get the embargo lifted. Others refused a retreat and did not view the United States as a real danger to their ambition.

Japanese Admiral Nagano belonged to the latter group. In September 1941- three months before the attack on Pearl Harbor - he presented the dilemma facing 'the land of the rising sun' in the following way: 'Japan was like a patient suffering from a serious illness … Should he be left alone without an operation, there was a danger of a gradual decline. An operation, while it might be dangerous, would still offer some hope of saving his life … the Army General Staff was in favour of putting hope in diplomatic negotiations, but … in the case of failure, a decisive operation would have to be performed' (Overy, 2009, p.342).

These examples demonstrate how expectations of relative decline can be seen as an incentive for initiating war sooner, driven by perceptions of weakened adversaries, opportunities for territorial expansion, and the desire to maintain or regain influence in the face of anticipated decline.

Before WWII, both Germany and Japan were rising powers that feared the prospects of future relative decline. Each country decided to initiate preemptive strikes on the Soviet Union and the United States respectively. Furthermore, the rise of the Axis powers corresponded with changes in the great military alliances and contributed to a major change in the balance of powers, increasing the likelihood of war.

GPW Indicator 2 and the Risk of Great Power War in Europe

The case studies above demonstrate that countries may retain a strong military posture even while the economic fundamentals are starting to wither. A future decline can induce great powers to take greater risks to expand and consolidate their power before it's too late. As Hal Brands suggests, 'military power is often a lagging indicator of a country's trajectory 'and while the demographic crisis and the mid income trap is looming in the background the display of

military might can be used to obfuscate the incontrovertible truth of a shaky bottom line of the Chinese economy, a *'great leap backwards'* (Brands, 2022).

A report from the US National Intelligence Council projected that 'Russia is likely to remain a disruptive power for much or all of the next two decades even as its material capabilities decline relative to other major players.' The report added that 'Russia's advantages, including a sizable conventional military, weapons of mass destruction, energy and mineral resources, an expansive geography, demographics, and a willingness to use force overseas, will enable it to continue playing the role of spoiler and power broker in the post-Soviet space, and at times farther afield.' Finally, the report suggested that reduced European energy reliance on Russia would curb future revenues as the world is transitioning to renewable sources of energy and thus erode the financial backbone of Russia's geopolitical position (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021). This was before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and although the positive short-term effects on oil and gas prices have compensated for renewed and expanded economic sanctions from Western countries, the war has effectively fast-tracked the European phasing out of Russian oil and gas.

Both China and Russia are facing a future economic and military decline and are starting to feel the teeth of US-led western sanctions on top of this, which are perceived to be containment efforts to slow down their rise and provoke a regime change (Buckley, 2023). Hence the contemporary great power competition is qualitatively different from the run up to the wars in 1914 and 1939. While Wilhelmian Germany was a latecomer in the race for colonial empire and felt that France and Great Britain blocked their 'place in the sun' there were no concerted effort to deliberately hinder Germany's economic growth prior to the war. Furthermore, although the Versailles treaty imposed heavy reparations on Germany and placed limitations on its military, territory, and economy prior to the outbreak of WWII, the Western powers were focused on domestic concerns and recovery from the Great Depression rather than actively seeking to hamper Germany's growth.

In conclusion, both China and Russia are facing a future economic and military decline due to internal and external structural factors such as demographics.

In addition, they are faced with a coalition of states that are imposing sanctions on their economies explicitly to undermine their economies and thus their military potential. Therefore, perhaps even more than the revisionist powers in WWI and WWII, China and Russia may perceive that there are no other options than war to change a trajectory that threatens their survival as states.

Europe is faced with another threat to the balance of power on the continent: changes in the military alliance systems.

GPW Indicators 3	**Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe**
Changes in great power military alliances	High Risk

Hypothesis: Changes in alliances can significantly impact the risks of war, as they alter the geopolitical landscape and can shift power dynamics between states. Shifts in alliances can indicate a changing balance of power, increase tensions between adversaries, and potentially increase the risk of war. When states perceive shifts in the distribution of power or threats, they may form or realign alliances to counterbalance their adversaries, potentially heightening tensions and creating a more volatile security environment. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, which included a secret agreement to divide Eastern Europe, is but one example. The Pact between the ideological adversaries took France and the United Kingdom by surprise and allowed Hitler to avoid a two-front war and focus on the invasion of Poland, which triggered the start of World War II. The pact demonstrated how unexpected alliances can radically shift the geopolitical landscape.

New alliances formed to counter new threats may result in increased tensions and heightened competition between rival powers. This can lead to a security

dilemma[2], where each side perceives the other's actions as threatening and responds with further militarisation. The German-British naval race combined with Germany's relative economic growth and Russia's military defeat pushed the United Kingdom to leave its splendid isolationism and establish the entente cordiale with Russia and France to balance against Germany (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.213). Furthermore, after the end of the Cold War, NATO enlarged to include several countries from Eastern Europe, including Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Russia viewed NATO's enlargement as a security threat and a breach of understandings reached after the Cold War. The enlargement of NATO – as well as the intervention in Libya in 2011 – contributed to increased tensions between Russia and the West, leading to concerns over potential military confrontations and the evolution of a strategic alliance between Moscow and Beijing (Kvernmo, 2019).

Changes in alliances can reflect a country's evolving geopolitical interests. For example, a nation might realign its alliances to pursue new economic opportunities, access resources, or secure military advantages. These shifts can create tensions and competition with other countries in the region or globally. NATO and most Western politicians and media appear to categorically discard the notion that Russia might perceive NATO enlargement eastwards and the inclusion of new members such as Sweden and Finland as existential threats. Aggressive behavior is not necessarily rooted in aggressive motivations but is likely to be interpreted as such when states or alliances perceive their own security enhancing measures as purely benevolent. In the context of the war in Ukraine, a Russian hostile reaction to NATO enlargement is interpreted as part of an aggressive power-maximising plan which only can be dealt with effectively through counterforce. Western politicians seem not only to be ignoring the security dilemma but also interpret Russian foreign policy as an extension of domestic policies and attributed to an aggressive and paranoid

[2] Walt (2022) emphasises the security dilemma as a key factor influencing alliances and war. The security dilemma refers to a situation where states' efforts to enhance their own security can inadvertently reinforcing the fears of the other, leading to a spiral of mistrust and potential conflict. Alliances can be seen as a way to mitigate the security dilemma by providing reassurance and enhancing deterrence.

leader akin to Adolf Hitler (Walt, 2022). While structural realists consider states as black boxes, most analysts appear to not draw a distinction between these two spheres and hence points to Russia's foreign policy as an extension of Putin's illiberal domestic policies, thus reaching the conclusion that any durable solution of the Ukraine war would necessarily include a change in the Russian political leadership. Similar demands preceded NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 and Western approach to the Syrian crisis the same year (Kvernmo, 2019).

In the event of a localised conflict involving alliance members, there is a risk that the conflict could escalate and involve other alliance partners. This escalation can occur due to mutual defense commitments or out of fear of being left isolated in a broader conflict. The interconnected nature of alliances can inadvertently draw multiple states into a war that initially involved a specific set of actors. Commitments within alliances can escalate conflicts when one member becomes involved in a dispute, and other alliance partners are obligated to support their ally. The involvement of multiple countries with diverse interests and objectives can complicate conflicts and make de-escalation more challenging. For example, the complex system of interlocking alliances of great powers before World War I led to a series of interconnected commitments. When Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the alliance obligations of various countries, such as Germany and Russia, triggered a chain reaction that escalated into World War I (Clark pp.124-35).

GPW Indicator 3 and the Risk of Great Power War in Europe

As argued above, the realignment of existing alliances can trigger war. The declaration of the NATO summit in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia would join the alliance without providing more details on timelines (against the wishes of Germany and France) (Erlanger and Lee Myers, 2008) and requirements provoked strong reactions in Moscow and contributed to the war in Georgia the same year (Karagiannis, 2013, p.89). This later influenced

the Russian decision to annex of Crimea and establish separatist republics in Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region (Mearsheimer, 2014) Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, both Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership, both of which were granted. While the expansion has created opposition from Turkey and Hungary, the Kremlin categorized the move as a 'violation of our security and our national interests' as the NATO border with Russia doubled with a signature (Kirby and Beale, 2023). The tensions have continued to increase since then when three gas and communication cables were severed between Finland and Estonia, accordingly by a China-registered tanker (Sytas and Kaurannen, 2023) and Kremlin sending hundreds of immigrants across the border, triggering border closures, and consequent tensions within the Russian ethnic minority living in Finland (Braw, 2024).

Even the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, recognised that NATO enlargement was a contributing cause of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war after NATO refused 'to sign a promise never to enlarge NATO,' as well as remove NATO infrastructure in all allies that have joined NATO since 1997' (NATO). This would have included Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Balkan countries. Stoltenberg referred to a list of demands presented by Russia to NATO in December 2021, two months before the invasion. The list has been used by academics such as John J. Mearsheimer and Jeffrey D. Sachs (Sachs, 2023) to demonstrate that Russia's actions were defensive, intended to stop NATO's eastward expansion, and that the war could have been prevented if only the West would have made a promise not to incorporate Ukraine in the alliance. However, they seem to overlook the other demands, particularly the scaling back of NATO infrastructure from post-1997 NATO members that was clearly a non-starter and could have preceded the reestablishment of a Russian Cold War sphere of influence. Furthermore, Dmitri Trenin, the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, suggested that the fact that Russia made the proposed agreements public could indicate that Moscow never believed the United States and allies would accept the terms and hence that they had decided to go ahead with unilateral military action (Roth, 2021). Finally, the father of offensive realism, John J Mearsheimer,

whose theory claim that states strive for maximising power – as opposed to maximising security – to ensure their own survival appears to contradict his position on Russia's intentions. From the perspective of offensive realism, maximising power and becoming the dominant regional power is a rational and predictable strategy. As Mearsheimer bluntly put it, 'In the anarchic world of international politics, it's better to be Godzilla than Bambi (2001 p.296).' In his analysis of Russian actions towards Ukraine from 2014 onwards, however, Mearsheimer adopts a defensive realist framework while viewing NATO expansion through the lens of offensive realism. This underestimation of Russian offensive intentions is reinforced by the tendency of offensive and defensive realists alike to downplay the evidence suggesting evolving change in the relationship between China and Russia from partners of convenience to strategic partners in the global competition with the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia (Menon and Walt 2019).

Russian calculations when initiating the war in Ukraine in 2022 were probably informed by the level of expected support from Beijing (Ni and Roth, 2022).[3] Whether or not Putin received a blank cheque from Xi in Beijing prior to the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the situation resonates with a similar unbalanced multipolar situation when Germany gave a blank cheque to Austria Hungary in July 1914 to attack Serbia that spun out of control and embroiled Europe and the entire world in a total war. Likewise, Stalin supported Mao's intervention in the Korean War in 1950 while China took a lead on the provision of military, economic, and personnel support for Vietcong (Jian, 2010, pp.54-5 and 206-07). Therefore, when assessing the indicators, it is insufficient to measure the balance of power between two of the great powers back-to-back and necessary to also include their alliance partners in the equation.

[3] Putin was last in Beijing in February 2022 during the Winter Olympics, right before Russia invaded Ukraine. Both countries at the time declared a 'no-limits' partnership. More in Faulconbridge, 2022.

The eastward enlargement of NATO and the incorporation of Finland and Sweden after 2022 on the one side and the strengthening of the de facto alliance between Russia and China on the other reflects a changing alliance landscape in Europe that reflects a changing balance of power in Europe and a sharp increase in the risks for a great power war.

While changes in great power alliances can indicate a heightened risk of the outbreak of war, so does an increase in military expenditure among the great powers.

GPW Indicators 4	**Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe**
% increase in military spending, arms buildup, and military modernization by major powers	High Risk

Hypothesis: A significant percentage increase in military spending, arms buildup, and military modernisation by major powers is likely to correlate with an elevated risk of great power conflict. In structural realism, states exist in an anarchic international system where there is no overarching authority to guarantee state security or enforce agreements or treaties. As a result, states prioritise their own security and survival, leading to a competitive pursuit of power. This pursuit can involve increasing military capabilities, forming alliances, or adopting defensive postures. However, these actions taken by one state to enhance its security can be interpreted as aggressive or threatening by other states, creating a security dilemma.

According to structural realists, the security dilemma arises from the fear, lack of trust, and uncertainty in the intentions of other states. Each state must consider the potential actions and capabilities of others and make decisions based on the assumption that other states may act in their own self-interest, potentially at the expense of others. As a result, even defensive measures taken by one state can be misperceived as offensive preparations by others, leading to a spiral of distrust, arms races, and potential conflict (Mearsheimer (2010) pp. 381-96).

The security dilemma highlights the inherent tensions and challenges faced by states in the international system. It suggests that even well-intentioned states may find themselves caught in a cycle of insecurity and mistrust due to the structural dynamics of the system. Structural realists argue that the security dilemma makes conflict and war more likely, as states seek to secure their own interests and protect against perceived threats.

Case Study: The Anglo-German Arms Race and the Causes of WWI

Understanding the security dilemma is crucial within the framework of structural realism because it underscores the systemic pressures and constraints that influence state behavior. It highlights the difficulties of achieving trust and cooperation among states in an anarchic international system, and it emphasises the role of power dynamics and the competitive pursuit of security in shaping the potential for conflict. The Anglo-German arms race prior to WWI has been highlighted by historians as one of the main causes of the Great War not the least because it fueled mutual suspicions and threat perceptions between the United Kingdom and Germany.

The Anglo-German naval arms race that took place in the decades leading up to World War I had a significant impact on the relationship between the United Kingdom and Germany. The United Kingdom, as a naval superpower, aimed to maintain its naval supremacy while Germany sought to challenge British naval dominance. The race became particularly tense with the introduction of the groundbreaking dreadnought battleships that made older vessels largely obsolete.

Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, Secretary of State of the German Imperial Naval Office, aimed to develop a navy strong enough to engage in offensive actions against the Royal Navy that would lead to an accommodation with Germany and thus strengthen the latter's position on the continent. The German vision was based on Admiral Tirpitz's risk theory that postulated that

when the German navy reached a strength equivalent to the British Royal Navy, the British would seek to avoid confrontation and seek accommodation with Germany and perhaps even join the Triple Alliance (Bird, 2005, p.822). Independent of the German intentions, this was perhaps one of the 'greatest failures of modern strategy' (Rock, 1988, pp.350-56) since the United Kingdom considered the expansion of the German navy as an existential threat to its survival as a great power. The naval superiority of the Royal Navy was critical for safeguarding the United Kingdom's global interests and ensuring the security of its empire. The German naval build up was viewed as a direct threat to this cornerstone of British security (Crowe, 1907)[4].

Another unanticipated and very negative effect for Germany was that the arms race drove the United Kingdom closer to Russia and France, through the Triple Entente, which aimed at balancing against the growing threat of Germany and isolating the country diplomatically (Clark, 2012 pp. 124-135). Additionally, the United Kingdom signed a naval agreement with Japan in 1902, thus securing the Royal Navy's flanks in the Western Pacific (Echevarria, 2015, p.22).

Finally, the race exacerbated existing geopolitical tensions and rivalries between the two countries, particularly in areas such as Africa and the Middle East. The declining Ottoman Empire presented opportunities for both Britain and Germany to increase their influence in the Middle East. Both powers sought to protect their strategic interests, including access to oil reserves, trade routes, and control over key ports in the region (Haythornthwaite, 2004, p.6.)

Critics argue that other factors were more significant in causing the war, such as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, militarism, the complex alliance systems, and the diplomatic failures leading up to the conflict. However, the arms race, combined with other geopolitical factors, created a sense of inevitability of a conflict between the United Kingdom and Germany. The growing military capabilities and the intensifying geopolitical rivalries

[4] Sir Eyre Crow a British diplomat and leading Germany expert in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, stated in his famous 1907 memo: 'Germany was aiming at a general political hegemony and maritime ascendancy, threatening the independence of her neighbors and incompatible with the survival of the British Empire.' More in Crowe (1907).

contributed to an overall deterioration in the relationship, heightening the risk of war.

Other critics maintain that German political and military leaders, far from being trapped in a security dilemma, considered the naval arms race as opportunities to promote their respective policies and agendas. Historians tend to agree that Admiral Tirpitz and the rest of the German political and military leadership upgraded and expanded the Germany navy for either deterrence or coercive purposes: to ensure British abstention from a future continental war and to establish bases and access markets overseas. In London, the measures raised fears that Germany's naval expansion was part of a broader strategy to challenge Britain's maritime hegemony and potentially encircle the British Isles (Kennedy, 1970, p.38).[5] This 'misunderstanding' clearly underscores the basic assumption of the security dilemma, namely that one can never be entirely certain about the intentions of the other side and even if its true today that the intentions are benign – frequently referred to by NATO leaders explaining the alliance enlargement into Eastern Europe – potential adversaries also must be prepared for a change of heart tomorrow.

GPW Indicator 4 and the Risk of Great Power War in Europe

In recent years there has been a significant increase in military spending, arms buildup, and military modernization among the great powers and their allies. Russia's military buildup, particularly in the aftermath of the conflict with Georgia in 2008, has drawn attention and raised concerns among neighbouring countries and NATO. Russia's efforts to modernise its armed forces, invest in advanced weaponry, and conduct large-scale military exercises have increased tensions and the risk of regional conflicts (Hackett, Childs, and Barrie, 2023). According to SIPRI, military spending in Europe in 2022 was 13 percent, the largest recorded by the institutions in this region since the end

[5] In his book 'The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery,' Paul M. Kennedy discusses how the British perceived potential threats to their maritime dominance and security, particularly in the context of naval competition with Germany.

of the Cold War, a change largely attributed to the war between Russia and Ukraine. In comparison, Russian military spending grew by an estimated 9.2 per cent in 2022. 'The continuous rise in global military expenditure in recent years is a sign that we are living in an increasingly insecure world,' said Dr Nan Tian, Senior Researcher with SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme. 'States are bolstering military strength in response to a deteriorating security environment, which they do not foresee improving in the near future' (SIPRI, 2023).[6]

The changes in the military capabilities among the great powers and their allies threaten the regional balance of power in Europe and we are currently witnessing strategic competition and an increased risk of war as the actors seek to maintain or regain a strategic advantage through preemptive strikes.

The final indicator relates to the level of competition over strategic regions and resources between great powers.

GPW Indicators 5	**Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe**
The intensity of great power competition over key strategic resources and regions	Medium risk

Hypothesis: An escalation in the intensity of great power competition over key strategic resources and regions is likely to heighten the risk of conflict among major powers. The degree of competition is expected to be influenced by factors such as increasing global demand for critical resources, geopolitical importance of strategic regions, and the economic and military capabilities of the competing powers. A more intense competition, marked by disputes over resource-rich territories or vital sea lanes, could lead to heightened geopolitical tensions and an increased likelihood of military confrontations as great powers vie for control and access to these critical resources and regions.

[6] According to SIPRI (2023) the sharpest increases were recorded in countries bordering Russia: Finland (+36 percent), Lithuania (+27 percent), Sweden (+12 percent), and Poland (+11 percent).

Structural realists have criticised the United States for dedicating the three decades following the end of the Cold War to the pursuit of liberal hegemony promoting human rights, rule of law, and market economies across the entire world and where priorities were removed from the notion of vital self-interest. In the perspective of some structural realists, the only regions of vital strategic interest for great powers are their own region, where other great powers are located, and where critical resources for the world economy are found (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.210).

According to Mearsheimer, competition for strategic resources often arises from the imperative of securing essential materials and commodities for economic and military purposes.

Since the distribution of power among states is a central driver of international politics in structural realism, states understand that access to and control of strategic resources enhances their overall power and influence on the world stage. Situations wherein states acquire in order to improve their own security or deny other states access strategic resources can inadvertently be perceived as threatening by other states and thus trigger the security dilemma.

Finally, the scarcity of strategic resources can exacerbate competition and rivalry among states as they contend for access to limited resources that are crucial for their economic development and national security. The Russo-Japanese War demonstrates how the competition over the strategic resource-rich regions of Manchuria and Korea led to war between these two great powers.

Case Study: The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905)

The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) was sparked by strategic competition between the Russia and Japan over control of Northeast Asia and access to the strategic resources of this region. While Russia sought to establish control over Manchuria to secure its Trans-Siberian Railway and expand its influence in the region, Japan saw Manchuria as a potential sphere of influence and a

gateway to further expansion in East Asia (Morris and Murphy, 2006, pp.131-2).

Moreover, the two powers also had conflicting interests in Korea, which was seen as strategically important for both trade and military purposes. Russia sought to maintain its influence over Korea while Japan aimed to assert its dominance and challenge Russian presence in the region.

The Russian lease of Port Arthur and Dalian (both located in the Liaodong Peninsula) from China, as part of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, was a source of tension.[7] Japan saw these territories as falling within its sphere of influence and sought their return while Russia aimed to consolidate its presence and control over the region (Hwang, 2010, pp.132-3).

The Russo-Japanese War was also fuelled by broader geopolitical rivalries and aspirations. Japan, having undergone significant modernisation and seeking to become a major world power, viewed Russia as an obstacle to achieving its regional ambitions. Meanwhile, Russia – the preeminent Eurasian power – sought to expand its influence in Europe while maintaining its influence in the Far East. Thus, Russia represented a direct and immediate challenge to Japan's ambitions and rise as a regional power.

Both Russia and Japan engaged in significant naval and military buildups, which added to the escalating tensions. Both powers were expanding their fleets and military capabilities, particularly in the maritime domain, with a focus on naval supremacy.

Japan sought to challenge Russian influence in the region, leading to a conflict that resulted in a major military defeat for Russia and a significant shift in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region (Morris and Murphy, 2006). The Japanese victory was an important steppingstone on the road to hegemony in East Asia.

[7] The Triple intervention of Russia, Germany, and France effectively blocked Japan from acquiring the Liaodong peninsula as stipulated in the Treaty of Shimonoseki after the first Sino-Japanese War. Therefore, the fact that Russia two years later occupied the peninsula caused significant consternation and resentment in Tokyo . For more read Boyle 1993.

Case Study: World War II in Europe

Resource competition also played a significant role in contributing to the outbreak of World War II in Europe. Nazi Germany, under Adolf Hitler, sought to expand its territories to gain access to oil fields and other strategic resources, such as iron ore in Sweden and Ukraine's agricultural lands. One of the lessons from WWI was the devastating impact of the blockade of Germany and furthermore, during the Great Depression, ensuring food security became a pressing concern for many countries. Access to fertile agricultural land and food supplies became an even more important factor in national security calculations. The competition for food resources, particularly in resource-scarce regions, contributed to tensions and conflicts (Craig, 1981, p. 676). Hitler therefore restructured the war plans around autarky and conquest and occupation of areas holding vital resources such as agricultural products, oil, and iron (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.91). In August 1939, Hitler stated that Germany needed 'Ukraine, in order that no one is able to starve us again as in the last war (Gerhard, 2009, p.46).

The German drive for autarky was thus rooted in desire to reduce the vulnerabilities of the German economy that surfaced during the WWI blockade, strengthen the German economy, and enhance its military capabilities (Hossbach memorandum accessed at Avalon Project). Hence the need for oil and other vital resources informed and influenced Germany's military objectives and strategies prior to the war, and with the German military successes at the onset of the war, the expansionist ambitions grew, consequently with a push to acquire territories with oil reserves to achieve greater economic independence and decrease its reliance on external suppliers. At the same time, control over oil resources would contribute to weaken the economic and military capabilities of Germany's adversaries by denying the latter access to these resources. Within six months of invading the Soviet Union, Germany had secured 71% of iron ore, 63% of its coal, and after one year, German troops had accessed the oil-rich Caucasus region (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.79)

The infamous Hunger Plan developed prior to Operation Barbarossa in July 1941 aimed to divert food from Ukraine and Central and Eastern Russia to Germany, and although the plan that included starving 30-40 million Slavs to death and converting the region into a large farming colony for the German people never fully materialised, it caused the deaths of 4,2 million Soviet citizens (mainly Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians) in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union from 1941-44 (Gerhard, 2009, p.46).

The examples above underscore how strategic competition among great power wars during the 20th century (and before) over key regions and vital resources increases the likelihood of armed conflict.

GPW Indicator 5 and the Risk of Great Power War in Europe

As the polar ice caps melt, the Arctic – believed to hold significant untapped natural resources, including oil, natural gas, minerals, and potential fisheries – has become an arena for strategic competition due to its increasing geopolitical and economic significance. Several major powers, including the United States, Russia, China, and some NATO member states, are actively involved in shaping their interests in the region.

For Russia, this development represents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the prospect of opening new trade routes between Asia and Europe could potentially shorten the travel time and costs between the two regions. Furthermore, the access to rare minerals, gas, and oil could strengthen the Russian economic position and influence over the global oil and gas market. On the other hand, the ice melting reduces the natural defense surrounding Russia's second-strike nuclear facilities in and around the Kola Peninsula and would therefore induce Russia to strengthen bastion defense. Bastion defense refers to a defensive strategy designed to protect strategic assets, such as ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) carrying nuclear weapons, covering the Barents and Norwegian sea and the GIUK gap (the sea between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom), consisting of 'multi-layered, sea denial and interdiction capabilities' (Boulegue, 2019). The strengthening of the bastion strategy 'would put more pressure on North Atlantic Sea lines of

communication (SLOC)' and would likely require more direct control over Northern Norway, including Svalbard to be effective (Kvernmo, 2019).

NATO countries have also increased their naval drills and exercises in the Arctic and have updated their plans and scaled up their permanent presence in the region. For example, US, UK, and Dutch rotational forces have increased their presence in Norway over the last few years (Savitz, 2022, p.39). The recent incorporation of Finland into NATO and imminent Swedish membership in the alliance will strengthen NATO's Arctic posture and – as a consequence – augment Russia's concern. Still, 'Russia now operates a third more Arctic military bases than the U.S. and NATO combined, suggesting a strategic advantage in the region' (Williams and Novak, 2022).

Furthermore, there have been several sabotage actions against gas pipelines and communication cables in the Baltic Sea since the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 that could be the start of a new phase of hybrid warfare against critical infrastructure (Oltermann, 2022). Europe is still highly dependent on fossil fuels as a source of energy, and 40% of the oil and gas consumed in EU countries originates from Russia. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU started implementing a plan to become independent from Russian oil and gas by 2030 (McGrath, 2022). In the meantime, the EU is divesting to countries like Norway that currently provides between 20 and 25% of EU gas needs to expand their capacity. This supply would be highly vulnerable to hybrid attacks and disruption could be used as blackmail or as a prelude to a larger offensive targeting NATO Europe.

Great Power Rivalry: Implications for Baltic Security

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally transformed the landscape of European security. While European leaders have recently been warning about a high risk of a Russian attack on a NATO country from 2025 onwards, NATO sounded the alarm of hostile Russian hybrid attacks across Europe in

May 2024, including in the Baltic nations (NATO 2024) and arguably Arctic Norway, the most vulnerable territories along Russia's border with NATO.

The previously inconceivable prospect of a large-scale cross-border conflict has reemerged as a serious possibility. Situated at the edge of this tense frontier, the Baltic states, which share borders with Russia and Belarus, are now central to this shifted paradigm.

The proximity to Russia is the most significant geopolitical challenge, a concern exacerbated by the presence of significant Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia, which Moscow could potentially leverage to exert influence or destabilise these countries.

Lithuania has a smaller Russian-speaking minority but faces strategic vulnerabilities due to its location; it borders the heavily fortified Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, believed to house nuclear weapons, and Belarus, which is closely aligned with the Kremlin. Additionally, the Suwałki Gap — a narrow corridor linking Lithuania with Poland — is considered by many military experts as NATO's most vulnerable point, highlighting the importance of strategic defense measures to prevent Russia from exploiting these geographic vulnerabilities (Cancian, Monaghan and Fata 2023).

Finland and Sweden's move to join NATO, a decision spurred by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, marks a significant shift in geopolitical dynamics, particularly affecting the security and defense of the Baltic states. Their inclusion in NATO is largely seen as beneficial, enhancing the security of the Nordic-Baltic region by integrating their capable armed forces into NATO's framework and politically fortifying the alliance (Lawrence T, Jermalavičius T, and Hyllander p.18). However, the transition also presents several challenges. Both nations face practical difficulties in adapting their military forces to meet NATO's deployment requirements, with Finland focusing traditionally on territorial defense and Sweden grappling with recruitment issues. Culturally, the shift from a policy of neutrality to one of collective defense necessitates significant adjustments in national defense policies and public perception, particularly concerning openly addressing security threats from Russia. (ibid. pp.24-25).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO prompted the Alliance in the 2023 Vilnius Summit to shift its strategy in the Baltics from a forward presence to forward defense. This transition marked a move from focusing on potentially reclaiming occupied territory to proactively defending against initial incursions, a forward presence strategy (Kepe and NATO 2023). This change was celebrated in the Baltic states, as they have long been concerned about the military and human cost of resistance behind enemy lines and the probabilities of regaining occupied land. A forward defense strategy would leverage the Baltic nations' lack of strategic depth, allowing NATO to respond swiftly and decisively with a larger force presence. This means that the current battlegroups will be expanded to brigade-sized forces when needed and a reliable system for quick deployment of reinforcements will be implemented, stockpiling essential equipment in the region and improving communication and leadership structures. The NATO Vilnius Summit also approved the creation of regional defense plans, including one specifically for the Baltic Sea region. These plans will detail specific troop deployments, exercises, and response protocols for potential threats in the region. Finally, several NATO members, including Canada and Germany, committed to increasing troop deployments in the Baltics, further bolstering the region's defenses (NATO 2023). The newest members of Sweden and Finland have also, as underscored above, committed to deploy troops to the Baltic region. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic governments have actively promoted an expansion in NATO and EU aid to Ukraine. From a realist perspective, NATO's approach to the Russo-Ukrainian War is to pass the buck to Ukraine to fight the rival nation of Russia and supply the former with weapons and ammunition to counter the attack of the invader or at least prevent the former from losing on the battlefield and thus contribute to 'zap[ping] the strength' of the aggressor in a protracted conflict (Mearsheimer (2001) p.154-55). It makes sense that the Baltic states – fearing that they might be the next in line – actively advocate within NATO and EU to continue and expand this policy.

However, such a hawkish diplomatic and forward leaning military posture runs the risk of triggering the security dilemma by raising fears in Moscow that the Baltic states are more likely to also be used as springboard in a NATO invasion of Russia and thus increase the chances of a Russian preemptive strike on the Baltic states before the forward presence strategy is fully implemented.

Furthermore, the recent applications for NATO membership by Sweden and Finland appear to have amplified the sense of encirclement in Moscow (The Moscow Times). Paradoxically, however, this expansion can be understood within the framework of the security dilemma. Both Finland and Sweden, driven by well-founded anxieties regarding a revisionist Russia, have made rational calculations to bolster their security through NATO membership.

Russia, on the other hand, perceives NATO's eastward expansion, particularly the inclusion of former Soviet republics, as a direct threat to its security sphere. The presence of NATO troops and military infrastructure close to its borders can be interpreted as a potential staging ground for a future attack. Therefore, what one side views as justified defensive measures to contain rival power can be interpreted by the other as a threatening encirclement strategy. This dynamic highlight the inherent dangers of the security dilemma, where actions taken to enhance security can inadvertently heighten tensions and contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy of conflict. However, the training and arming local militias can be an effective deterrent against foreign invasion without – depending on their design – triggering the security dilemma.

Recommendations

The Baltic States are already members of NATO, which is a significant deterrent against Russian aggression. They should continue to strengthen these ties, ensure the commitment of larger powers within the alliance, particularly the United States, and advocate for a continuous NATO presence in the region, including military exercises, accelerated permanent presence of NATO brigades on Baltic nations' soil, and the pre-positioning of military equipment. For the Baltic States, this means enhancing their military capabilities and readiness. While individually they may lack the resources to

compete with Russia, collectively and with strategic investments in modern defense technology, they can improve their deterrence posture.

From a structural realist perspective, the Baltic states cannot match Russia's military might head-on. However, by adopting a strategy of deterrence by denial, they can convince Russia that the costs of an invasion are simply too high. By strengthening their defenses, fostering robust NATO integration and cohesion, and promoting regional stability, the Baltic states can maximise their chances of remaining secure in a challenging geopolitical environment.

Focus on Defensive Capabilities: Investments in territorial defense forces, infrastructure for rapid troop movement, and civil defense preparedness would bolster defensive capabilities. This demonstrates a focus on self-defense rather than offensive capabilities that might threaten Russia. To maximise the costs of an invader while minimising the impact of the security dilemma, the Baltic nations should design their defenses with weapon systems that are mainly defensive in nature such as missile defense systems, air defense systems, coastal defensive systems, and anti-tank weapons that have limited offensive utility. The core design and intended use of these systems focus on deterring attacks, protecting territory and populations, and preventing enemy forces from achieving their objectives.

Managing Escalation Risks: Deterrence strategies must carefully calibrate the message to avoid unintentionally provoking a conflict. The need to exaggerate the Russian threat to maintain NATO resolve and support could backfire if Moscow misinterprets the position of the Baltic states. A forward defense strategy should be balanced with reassurances that neither Latvia, Lithuania, nor Estonia will be used as steppingstones for unprovoked offensive actions against Russian territory. While offensive realists would advise balancing powers to adopt a confrontational stance, defensive realists would advocate for a more conciliatory approach. This is based on their fundamental assumption that Russia is primarily seeking to maximize its security rather than expand its power (Mearsheimer 2001 p.156).

Balanced Communication: Baltic leaders need to carefully communicate the perceived threats to both their domestic populations and international partners. This involves providing clear, evidence-based assessments of the risks, avoiding overly provocative or sensational language that could exacerbate Russian fears and diplomatic tensions and undermine the internal cohesion of the countries. The Baltic states can work to undermine Russian claims and narratives that might justify or support aggression against them. This includes strengthening internal resilience against disinformation, bolstering national identity, and making the costs of invasion starkly clear to Russia and its populace.

Consider Nuclear Deterrence Strategies: However, given the threat posed by Russia against the Baltic states and their geopolitical vulnerabilities, perhaps the political leadership in these countries needs to look beyond conventional deterrence strategies. While pursuing nuclear weapons is controversial and fraught with political complications, from a pure offensive realist perspective, acquiring nuclear capabilities is considered an ultimate deterrent. For example, it is unlikely that Russia would have invaded Ukraine if the latter had retained its nuclear weapons rather than giving them up in 1995. However, given the non-proliferation norms and treaties, a more realistic approach for the Baltics would be to host nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear sharing policy, increasing the strategic deterrence in the region at the least until the forward defense plan is effectively implemented.

Conclusions

In conclusion, predicting the outbreak of a great power war is a complex endeavor that requires a nuanced understanding of international relations. This article has explored the application of structural realism indicators as a framework for anticipating the likelihood of conflicts among great powers. Drawing on indicators measuring changes in the balance of power, alliance systems, military expenditure, and the intensity of the competition over strategic resources and regions, structural realism offers valuable insights into the systemic forces shaping the geopolitical landscape in the world and provides critical elements for forecasting potential conflicts. Examining

historical precedents and current geopolitical trends through the lens of structural realism provides a theoretical foundation for assessing the risk of war among great powers in Europe and elsewhere.

While structural realism provides a robust framework, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The theory may not capture the full spectrum of the dynamic nature of international relations and the potential for unforeseen events pose challenges to precise predictions. More elaborate, early warning tools – mentioned in the introduction of this article – exist for that purpose and these could complement the GPW framework to pin down more exact timing and location of the outbreak of a great power war. Finally, there is a need to develop better tools to measure the indicators more accurately, particularly those related to the balance of power between the different potential alliance constellations like SIPRI's database on military expenditure.

The findings from this article are that there is an overall high risk of great power war in Europe. Four out of five indicators were assessed as high and one, the indicator related to the intensity of competition over strategic resources and regions, is assessed at medium risk. Therefore, it is imperative to prepare to mitigate the continent-wide impacts of such potentially devastating yet highly likely great power war.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped European security, placing the Baltic states at the center of a tense geopolitical landscape. Russia's structural shift towards a war economy, tripling pre-war military spending to 6%, which indicates that the country is on an irreversible track to maximize their power in Europe to ensure their own security. The Baltic states, vulnerable due to their proximity to Russia's heavily fortified Kaliningrad exclave, must prepare for the possibility of a regional conflict as Russia seeks to address its territorial vulnerabilities before the Western powers gain a significant advantage. While membership in NATO offers a significant deterrent, the Baltic nations must navigate a complex path to ensure their security. This requires a multifaceted approach that combines strong

deterrence with measures to reduce the risk of unintended escalation. By pursuing these strategies, the Baltic states can maximise their security in a challenging environment. They can demonstrate their unwavering commitment to self-defense while fostering regional stability and deterring potential Russian aggression. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent complexities and potential risks involved in each approach. The path forward requires careful calibration and a nuanced understanding of the security dilemma.

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