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WHICH FACTORS DRIVE RUSSIA'S
GRAND STRATEGY ADJUSTMENT:
PRESSURE, PERCEPTION, POWER

MA thesis

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Author's declaration

I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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Abstract

Relations between Russia and the West, mainly the US, EU and NATO, have continuously deteriorated in the past decades due to several crises and differing answers to these by the relevant players, e.g. in the cases of Ukraine and Syria. Whereas there are numerous works which deal with the phenomena of Russian foreign policy conduct in those crises from a realist point of view, there are remarkably few that take a neoclassical realist perspective. This paper does, looking at such international crises as part of a bigger picture: Russian grand strategy. In short, the thesis finds that perceived pressures from the IS, moderated by relative material power capabilities, drive Russian grand strategy adjustment. The results of the case study enhance our understanding of Russian foreign policies and grand strategy, and demonstrate the flexibility and applicability of neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework to explain various phenomena in international politics.

Die Beziehungen zwischen Russland und dem Westen, hauptsächlich den USA, der EU und der NATO, haben sich in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten aufgrund verschiedener Krisen und unterschiedlicher Antworten auf diese durch die relevanten Akteure stetig verschlechtert, wie in den Krisen um die Ukraine und Syrien zu beobachten ist. Während viele Abhandlungen die russische Außenpolitik in diesen Fällen aus einer realistischen Perspektive untersuchen, gibt es erstaunlich wenige die dabei eine neoklassische realistische Position einnehmen. Die vorliegende Arbeit nimmt letztere Perspektive ein und betrachtet solche Krisen als Teil eines größeren Ganzen: Russlands ‚grand strategy‘. Die Thesis stellt fest, dass in Russland wahrgenommene strukturelle Zwänge des IS die grand strategy Anpassung beeinflussen, und die Ausprägung der Anpassung dabei von Russland’s relativen materiellen Machtkapazitäten moderiert wird. Die Ergebnisse der Fallstudie bringen unser Verständnis von russischer Außenpolitik und grand strategy voran, und demonstrieren außerdem die Flexibilität und Anwendbarkeit des neoklassischen Realismus als theoretischer Rahmen für die Erklärung verschiedenster Phänomene der internationalen Politik.

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List of abbreviations

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States

EU – European Union

FPC – Foreign Policy Concept

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

IR – International Relations

IS – International System

MAP – Membership Action Plan

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NSC – National Security Concept

NSS – National Security Strategy

UN – United Nations

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

US – United States of America

Introduction

The relations between Russia and the West, understood broadly as the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have deteriorated in the past decades due to several crises and differing answers to these by the respective players, e.g. in the cases of Ukraine and Syria. Trying to explain those crises, thereby regularly accusing Russian foreign policy behavior as solely responsible, scholars and experts often resort to structural (neo)realist approaches of International Relations (IR) theory.¹ These approaches emphasize states as unitary actors eternally searching for security and survival in the anarchic world of the International System (IS), wherein structural pressures and incentives emanating from the IS are described as most crucial forces determining state behavior. The states themselves remain ‘black boxes’ which cannot be looked inside, and the preeminence of hard power tools, like military and economic means of coercion, over soft power tools such as diplomacy or information, is assumed to be evident.

Notwithstanding the explanatory power of these structural realist approaches regarding many cases of state behavior in the IS including Russia, IR scholars like Robert Jervis have shown that *perception* matters in international politics and that purely structural approaches also often fail to explain state foreign policy behavior.² Now if it is assumed that well-read structural realists like Mearsheimer as well as more individual-level (‘first image’) oriented IR scholars like Jervis have valid points, a theoretical framework is needed that combines both perspectives.

Russia reacted with different strategies to similar situations of heightened systemic pressure at different points in time, for instance in 2004 when the Baltic states joined NATO, or when in 2014 the prospect of an Ukrainian NATO membership became increasingly realistic, at least in Russian perception; the question then arises which factor(s) changed and caused the different outcomes? Because structural realist

¹ See for a neorealist approach to the Ukraine crisis John J. Mearsheimer, ‘Why the Ukraine Crisis Is The West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin’, in *Foreign Affairs*, September/October (2014), 1-12; For an account of the main realist approaches to the Ukraine crisis see Paul D’Anieri, ‘Magical realism: assumptions, evidence and prescriptions in the Ukraine conflict’, in *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 60.1 (2019), 97–117.

² See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), especially pp. 14-15, p. 21.

approaches are unable to explain those variations in Russian foreign policy behavior with systemic pressures alone, a mid-range theory of IR is needed which can incorporate other factors than systemic ones. Considering both the structural realist assumption that systemic pressures are crucial in driving state behavior as well as the broadly accepted insight that perception matters in international politics, a neoclassical realist framework is adopted here; this allows for the inclusion of systemic as well as unit-level variables in a disciplined interpretative case study.³

If purely systemic factors are insufficient to explain Russian foreign policy behavior, we can then ask further if the latter follows a higher strategy, which extends the scope of a few years and aims at reaching long-term goals through the combined use of all available resources of the state. This higher strategy is operationalized within the concept of ‘grand strategy’, a much used and often instinctively understood term in IR theory, though still missing a universally accepted definition.⁴

In the case of Russia, the thesis considers Andrei Kokoshin’s thought, “that *strategiya* in the Soviet/Russian context [does] not just mean military strategy, but [encompasses] more global connotations, reflecting the attainment of the state’s wider aims by whatever means are considered most expedient.”⁵ Accordingly, the concept of grand strategy applied to Russia reaches well beyond military strategy; even more so considering today’s world, where non-military means such as information and diplomacy have gained considerable leverage in dealing with other states. This development has its origin in the diverse structural changes that took place in the IS during the last three decades, such as the Cold War ending, increased economic and political interdependency due to globalization and regionalization processes, and technological innovations in the information and cyber spheres.⁶

Though this makes an extensive approach to the concept of grand strategy necessary and separates it at the same time from pure strategy,⁷ it must be ordered in a way that allows

³ Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’, in *World Politics* 51.1 (1998), 144–72, p. 146.

⁴ Cf. Nicholas Kitchen, ‘Systemic pressures and domestic ideas: a neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation’, in *Review of International Studies* 36.1 (2010), 117–43, p. 119.

⁵ Cited in Andrew Monaghan, ‘Putin’s Russia: shaping a “grand strategy”?’’, in *International Affairs* 89.5 (2013), 1221–36, p. 1224.

⁶ See Hans-Georg Ehrhart, ‘Postmodern warfare and the blurred boundaries between war and peace’, in *Defense & Security Analysis* 33.3 (2017), 263–75, pp. 264–266.

⁷ Peter Layton, ‘The Idea of Grand Strategy’, in *The RUSI Journal* 157.4 (2012), 56–61, p. 57.

for systematic analysis. For this purpose, the approach of political scientist Harold Lasswell to the concept of grand strategy is used. Lasswell separated the latter into four different dimensions, stating that a “fourfold division of policy instruments is particularly convenient when the external relations of a group are being considered: *information, diplomacy, economics and military* (words, deals, goods and weapons).”⁸

These dimensions serve as an ordering frame for the empirical part of this thesis, where an adjustment of Russian grand strategy is demonstrated through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in those very dimensions; however, rather than being interested in this adjustment itself, this work takes a factor-oriented approach and explains which factors drive Russia’s grand strategy adjustment.

The research interest of this thesis is why Russia adjusted its national interests and foreign policy behavior to the deterioration of relations with the West over the course of the last two decades, from 1998 to 2018. In other words, the research question is ‘which factors drive Russia’s grand strategy adjustment?’ The thesis answers this question within a neoclassical realist framework, positing that perceived structural pressures from the IS, moderated by Russian relative material power capabilities, are main drivers of Russia’s grand strategy adjustment. Expressed in a hypothesis, this means that *the higher the perceived systemic pressures from the IS, the more Russia will adjust its grand strategy, to the extent its relative material power capabilities allow it to do so.*

The objective of this work is to contribute to a better understanding of Russian foreign policy conduct, which too often seems to confuse Western policy makers and take them by surprise, such as in the case of the Russian annexation of Crimea 2014 or its military intervention in Syria 2015.⁹ The importance and relevance of the research question is to be found in a better understanding of the factors that drive grand strategy adjustment in the Russian case. If we can improve our grasp of how Russia perceives pressures from the IS and how its material power capabilities moderate its foreign policy behavior, this could perhaps help in the future “to counter some of the strong sense of surprise that is

⁸ Cited in Layton, p. 58. [emphasis F.H.]

⁹ Mark N. Katz, ‘Russian Intervention in the Syrian Civil War’, in *Russian Analytical Digest* 175 (2015), 2–5, p. 2.

too often evident among Western policy-makers when confronted with Russian actions.”¹⁰

The research design of the thesis is a qualitative case study of Russia’s grand strategy adjustment over the course of two decades; this includes CDA as a method to assess Russian grand strategy adjustment through examining the grand strategy discourse over time in major strategic documents. To be more precise, it is a disciplined interpretive case study, which “interprets or explains an event by applying a known theory to the new terrain.”¹¹ The known theory is neoclassical realism, which will be applied to the new terrain of Russian grand strategy adjustment; there are remarkably few scholars who used Russian grand strategy as an object of their research,¹² and at the point of writing apparently none that centers on Russia’s grand strategy *adjustment*. Further, as Balzacq et al. note, important questions remain inadequately researched, such as “what drives strategic change or adjustment? How do we know when (and under what conditions) a grand strategy changes?”¹³

The remainder of this work is structured as follows: the first chapter provides an overview of the theoretical origins of the concept of grand strategy, including a clarification of the concept used in this work. A section within the first chapter explores neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework serving the thesis’ research interest; the chapter further includes arguments which demonstrate that the thesis constitutes a contribution to the research field of grand strategy, Russian foreign policy and the broader field of security and strategic studies.

Following this, the second chapter elaborates on the method and research design of the thesis, and the subsequent fourth chapter is divided into two sections, each consisting of the analytical narratives concerned with the analysis of the periods 1998-2008 and 2008-2018, respectively. Finally, the last chapter concludes the thesis with a summary of the findings, possible future research questions within the theoretical framework of

¹⁰ Andrew Monaghan, *Defibrillating the Vertical? Putin and Russian Grand Strategy*, Russia and Eurasia Programme (Chatham House, 2014), p. 19.

¹¹ John S. Odell, ‘Case Study Methods in International Political Economy’, in *International Studies Perspectives* 2 (2001), 161–76, p. 163.

¹² Cf. Monaghan, ‘Putin’s Russia’, p. 1225.

¹³ Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, ‘Is Grand Strategy a Research Program? A Review Essay’, in *Security Studies* 28.1 (2019), 58–86, p. 79.

neoclassical realism, and, at last, some implications for foreign-policy researchers and professionals alike who are concerned with Russia.

1 Grand strategy and neoclassical realism

1.1 The concept of grand strategy

The literature in the research field of grand strategy, a subfield of security studies, is plenty and diverse; at the same time, there is still no single, universal definition of the concept of grand strategy. It seems the only thing scholars can agree on is that it is something bigger than pure strategy, meaning it is long-term in scope, aims to reach crucial state goals and uses all available resources of the state for that purpose. Similar sounding definitions exist parallel to each other, contributing more to confusion about the concept than to clarity. While sceptics criticize this as incoherent and obstructive for positivist research purposes, it offers at the same time a highly flexible conceptual framework; in this conception, such a framework is necessary to investigate long-time, highly complex grand strategies of diverse nations with most different backgrounds regarding geopolitical location, society, culture, and history. As Balzacq et al. frame it, although this conceptual variety “signals a lack of common ground”¹⁴, it is nonetheless “a testimony to the vitality of the research being undertaken in this field.”¹⁵

Besides Balzacq et al., Harvard grand strategy researcher Nina Silove offers a very good and up-to-date overview of the most prominent and influential works on the field of grand strategy,¹⁶ and much of the following section is referenced back to her work. While the studies of strategy and grand strategy date at least back until Thucydides and his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a historic account of the causes and motives of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta and their respective allies, it has gained real popularity again with Carl von Clausewitz in the late 18th century.¹⁷ His work includes an exploration of what strategy is, and how a successful strategy is to be applied, and has kept significance in the realms of political and military science as well as in the praxis of politics until today. Especially with the differentiation between policy and strategy as two different concepts did Clausewitz influence the study of strategy in the

¹⁴ Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich, p. 74.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nina Silove, ‘Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy’’, in *Security Studies* 27.1 (2018), 27–57.

¹⁷ See Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2003).

20th century as well as modern-day scholars of grand strategy. Nina Silove summarizes Clausewitz' distinction between the two concepts as "Strategy [being] the product of deliberate efforts by individuals to use engagements to achieve the object of the war. Policy is an analytic construct that refers to the state's interests without specifying the source of those interests or how they manifest."¹⁸

In this conception, strategy is not yet grand, but distinguished from policy. Clausewitz established further a distinction between tactics and strategy, the former describing "the art of using troops in battle"¹⁹, the latter defined as "the art of using battles to win the war."²⁰ This line of thought laid the groundwork for the conception of strategy being something bigger, aimed at winning a given war, and struck roots in academic debates. Consequently, one scholar influenced by Clausewitz became a key ancestor of contemporary scholarship on grand strategy: B. H. Liddell Hart, who observed in the interwar period that there was a higher level of strategy, above the level Clausewitz introduced, which he termed grand strategy.²¹

The intellectual influence Clausewitz had on Hart is evident in the latter's similar distinction between policy and strategy, and in his development of the concept of grand strategy, outgoing from Clausewitz' definition of strategy and broadening it.²² For Hart, grand strategy is grand, because it operates on the highest level of strategy and is in its nature "'higher strategy' that coordinates 'all the resources of the nation'."²³ In this conception, grand strategy is seen as a plan for the direction of all available means of a state to certain ends, but those ends can be quite far away in the future and are bigger in scope than the immediate political object in a given war. Thus, grand strategy distinguishes itself from a war plan by that "it extends beyond the war to prepare for the future peace and includes consideration of the use of all the state's resources, not just military force."²⁴ These resources include between others informational, economic, and diplomatic means to reach grand strategy objectives, whereby informational and diplomatic means obtained considerably more importance in attaining foreign policy

¹⁸ Silove, p. 35.

¹⁹ Cited in Kitchen, p. 119.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Silove, p. 34.

²² Silove, p. 35.

²³ Cited *ibid.*

²⁴ Ibid.

objectives after the end of the Cold War in the consequently emerging multipolar and increasingly interdependent world order.²⁵

In line with this logic and following a growing consensus among grand strategy scholars, the relationship between grand strategy and policy is conceptualized as hierarchic, assuming that “policy springs from, and is shaped by, grand strategy.”²⁶ This means that Russian foreign policies are seen here as means to accomplish or at the minimum come closer to the grand strategy objectives, and that their execution at the same time constitute indicators for Russian grand strategy adjustment. This is grounded in the fact that foreign policy tools such as military, diplomatic, or economic measures number among the most effective ones to reach major international objectives, which in turn are most crucial in substantially altering power distributions in the IS.

While not objecting to the important insight that “crafting and implementing a grand strategy is contingent as much on domestic politics as on the structural forces of international relations”²⁷, this thesis emphasizes structural pressures from the IS as the independent variable. Conceptualized as perceived international pressures of the IS (be they real or imagined), the independent variable drives Russia to adjust its grand strategy. To what extent Russia can adjust its grand strategy, depends on the moderating variable of its relative material power capabilities, a domestic factor.

The intellectual history of grand strategy as a concept shaped by Clausewitz and Hart influenced the British historian and international security studies scholar Paul Kennedy, whose definition of grand strategy is much used today and appreciated as one of the definitions with lasting significance.²⁸ Kennedy thought grand strategy in a much similar line with Hart regarding its scope in time and reaching well beyond a given war: “A true grand strategy was now to do with peace as much as (perhaps even more than) war. [...] It did not cease at a war’s end, nor commence at its beginning.”²⁹

This view implicitly asserts that grand strategies are devised by individuals like heads of states and their cabinet members, meaning that “grand strategy is a deliberate plan that

²⁵ See Andrei P. Tsygankov, ‘Preserving Influence in a Changing World’, in *Problems of Post-Communism* 58.2 (2011), 28–44, pp. 35-37.

²⁶ Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich, p. 73.

²⁷ Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich, p. 61.

²⁸ Silove, p. 32.

²⁹ Cited in Emre İşeri, ‘The US Grand Strategy and the Eurasian Heartland in the Twenty-First Century’, in *Geopolitics* 14.1 (2009), 26–46, p. 29.

‘exists’ in the same way that a war plan ‘exists’, the latter being an entity the existence of which is far less commonly in doubt.”³⁰ Here it comes to the approach to grand strategy that is adopted in the thesis; grand strategy conceptualized as a deliberately devised plan which exists in reality. While the timeframe of 20 years analyzed in the thesis regarding Russian grand strategy adjustment might seem rather short in consideration of Kennedy’s notion cited above, the thesis is focused on the adjustment of Russian grand strategy due to external and internal factors rather than its *formation*. Further, looking at the moderating variable of relative material power capabilities and its relative stability at low levels during the 1990s, this argues also for the setting of the timeframe. Before 2000 and the following years, there was simply not enough variation in the value of the moderating variable to allow for meaningful analysis in this thesis’ framework.

The question when Russian grand strategy formation started, perhaps before Putin,³¹ possibly as early as in the beginning of the 1990s,³² would be interesting to examine but is not discussed in this thesis. On the one hand because others have done it already,³³ on the other hand because such a research would not produce implications nor insights of practical value for reality. Similarly, it would be intriguing to ask if perhaps not a formation, but a *transformation* took place after the end of the Cold War, which would mean that parts of Soviet or even Imperial Russian grand strategy could still be found in today’s Russia’s grand strategy. These questions are also not raised in this thesis, because they already have been discussed,³⁴ and the grand strategy of the Russian Empire and its legacy has been research object for various historians.³⁵

The concept of grand strategy applied in this thesis, which is heir to the intellectual history of Clausewitz, Hart, and Kennedy, defines grand strategy as a deliberate plan devised by decision-making elites on the highest level of government, using all available resources of the state to reach or come closer to the grand strategy objectives. Silove terms this “grand plan”, in opposition to “grand principles” and “grand behavior”, which are the two

³⁰ Silove, p. 36.

³¹ Cf. Tsygankov, p. 31.

³² See *Russia, Eurasia and the New Geopolitics of Energy*, ed. by Matthew Sussex and Roger E. Kanet (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), p. 37.

³³ Cf. Monaghan, ‘Putin’s Russia’, p. 1226.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁵ See John P. LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650-1831* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

other intellectual approaches to grand strategy.³⁶ While grand principles describe an organizing principle in which individuals in the state apparatus consciously operate and make their decisions, her term grand behavior refers to a “pattern in state behavior”³⁷ more situated in behavioralist approaches to IR.³⁸

In this thesis, grand strategy is conceptualized as an existing plan, devised by Russian decision-making elites. The conceptualization of grand strategy as a deliberately devised plan supports the choice of the Russian National Security Strategies (NSSs) and other official doctrines to demonstrate that Russian grand strategy did adjust over the last two decades. This adjustment correlates with changes in Russian perception of pressures from the IS as well as with variations in its relative material power capabilities, as will be shown in the empirical sections of this thesis.

This conceptualization of grand strategy as a plan does not propose that there must be one single written document for a grand strategy to exist. As Geoffrey Parker demonstrates with the case of Philip II of Spain, “the absence of a comprehensive masterplan among the papers of Philip and his ministers does not prove the absence of comprehensive ambitions.”³⁹ Quite on the contrary, Parker demonstrates the existence of a “remarkable—and remarkably coordinated— military, naval, diplomatic and economic effort against England.”⁴⁰

Further, if grand strategy is conceptualized as a plan, “then it is not a necessary characteristic of the concept that the plan remain constant. [...] the long-term characteristic of grand strategy refers to the nature of the plan, not to the plan’s longevity in operation.”⁴¹ Backed by realist theories’ insight that structural pressures and incentives fluctuate within the IS and compel states to adjust their behavior in the international sphere flexibly,⁴² it would be wrong to assume that grand strategy is somehow fixed in its objectives. Rather, the grand strategy will be adjusted to changing circumstances like smaller strategies are, be it through balancing, build-up of arms, or, as in this thesis’

³⁶ Silove, p. 29.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁹ Cited in Silove, p. 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Silove, p. 52.

⁴² See Christopher Layne, ‘The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise’, in *International Security* 17.4 (1993), 5–51, p. 12.

framework, through grand strategy adjustment, which then in turn shapes the foreign policy of the state in order to reach the adjusted objectives.⁴³

Hence, a grand strategy is in constant need for adjustment due to “evolving conditions and circumstances in a world in which chance, uncertainty and ambiguity dominate, not least in respect of the actions, intentions and purposes of other actors.”⁴⁴ This point is made by Andrew Monaghan, one of the few scholars who apply the concept of grand strategy regularly to modern Russia, and it supports the thesis’ hypothesis that Russia adjusts its grand strategy due to perceived systemic pressures from the IS.

Kennedy’s definition of grand strategy and Silove’s summary of the various approaches to the term into three different meanings are certainly useful if one is concerned with the question *what* grand strategy actually is. However, they do not deliver explanations for what factors influence and drive grand strategy adjustment in Russia; this thesis is intended to fill this gap, using a neoclassical realist framework to demonstrate that perceived pressures from the IS, moderated by relative material power capabilities, drive the adjustment of Russia’s grand strategy.

Since the research question is ‘Which factors drive Russia’s grand strategy adjustment?’, this thesis is mainly concerned with the factors that drive grand strategy adjustment and not *if* there is a Russian grand strategy at all or what components exactly constitute that strategy. That there in fact is a Russian grand strategy will be demonstrated in the subsequent empirical sections. As Monaghan rightfully notes in an analysis of Putin and Russian grand strategy, a paper concerned with the latter “touches lightly on many important aspects that might warrant more detailed examination in their own right.”⁴⁵

The very concept of grand strategy comprises the most important and hence most extensive policy dimensions (economic, military, information, diplomatic) and is therefore to be researched holistically. This is necessary to capture the ‘whole picture’ and answer important remaining questions in the research field of grand strategy, such as “what drives strategic change or adjustment? How do we know when (and under what conditions) a grand strategy changes?”⁴⁶ Further, as Monaghan argues, “A better grasp of this [Russian] attempt to build a strategic outlook will help to counter some of the strong

⁴³ Cf. Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich, p. 73.

⁴⁴ Monaghan, ‘Putin’s Russia’, p. 1227.

⁴⁵ Monaghan, ‘Putin and Russian Grand Strategy’, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich, p. 79.

sense of surprise that is too often evident among Western policy-makers when confronted with Russian actions.”⁴⁷

While all the cited studies contribute significantly to the research field of grand strategy in one way or another, a lot of them are concerned with what grand strategy is in the first place, if such a thing exists at all,⁴⁸ or if it exists in the case of Russia.⁴⁹ None of those looks at the drivers of grand strategy adjustment, or posits this question in a neoclassical realist framework like this thesis does.

The pressures perceived by Russia as emanating from the IS, such as the NATO Membership Action Plans (MAPs) and similar Western advances of recent years aimed at neighbouring states of Russia, drive the grand strategy adjustment of Russia. To what extent a grand strategy adjustment occurs is moderated by Russia’s relative material power capabilities, which are operationalized as gross domestic product (GDP) and military spending, and by state capacity in the neoclassical realist sense. This means that not just a given state’s relative power in form of existent resources is considered, but also the state’s ability to extract those resources through various means. These include, in the case of Russia, an effective taxation system without widespread corruption and tax evasion, and a strong state control over crucial branches of the economy.⁵⁰

At least that is what this thesis finds using its neoclassical realist framework, although this is not to deny the very likely influence of other factors in a multi-layered, complicated decision-making structure such as that of Russia, or any other given state. For instance, the factor of public opinion in grand strategy processes is certainly important and worth further research,⁵¹ as is the case with the influence of domestic ideas on grand strategy formation.⁵²

⁴⁷ Monaghan, ‘Putin and Russian Grand Strategy’, p. 20.

⁴⁸ See Richard K. Betts, ‘Is Strategy an Illusion?’, in *International Security* 25.2 (2000), 5–50.

⁴⁹ Cf. Monaghan, ‘Putin’s Russia’, p. 1221.

⁵⁰ Elias Götz, ‘Enemy at the Gates: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation of Russia's Baltic Policy’, in *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15 (2019), 99–117, p. 111.

⁵¹ See Ben D. Mor, ‘Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy’, in *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2 (2006), 157–76.

⁵² Cf. Kitchen, p. 119.

1.2 Neoclassical realism as a mid-range theory

Gideon Rose is the scholar who is usually praised as the one who coined the term neoclassical realism in his review article from 1998, in which he summarizes five works and their theoretical frameworks under the new term.⁵³ According to Rose, neoclassical realism is a mid-range theory and incorporates components from both structural as well as classical realism, stating that “the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities.”⁵⁴ Rose then goes on in explaining “that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level.”⁵⁵ This intellectual groundwork serves as the ordering frame of the neoclassical realist approach in this thesis, which was further inspired by a more practical application of the theory by Elias Götzt.

In a recent analysis from Götzt in *Foreign Policy Analysis*, he delivers a neoclassical realist explanation of the question “what accounts for the shift in Russia’s approach toward the Baltics in the middle of the 2000s?”⁵⁶ Ultimately, Götzt comes to the conclusion that

Compared to the previous period, Moscow’s Baltic policy has become more cohesive and assertive since the middle of the 2000s. [...] this can be explained by the rebuilding of Russian state capacity, which enables Moscow to respond more effectively to external pushes and pulls.⁵⁷

What Götzt calls state capacity is conceptualized in this thesis’ framework as relative material power capabilities, thus constituting “a *moderating variable* that conditions the impact of system-level impulses on actual foreign policy behavior.”⁵⁸ The system-level impulses are included in the present framework as systemic pressures emanating from the IS as the independent variable, driving Russian grand strategy adjustment to the extent the moderating variable allows so. Whereas Götzt takes a quite narrow focus on Russian

⁵³ Rose, p. 146.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Götzt, p. 100.

⁵⁷ Götzt, p. 113.

⁵⁸ Götzt, p. 104.

Baltic policy, the reasoning behind this thesis' framework is that the latter did constitute, and still does, only a part of Russian grand strategy in the European theater.

This thesis proposes that one independent and one moderating variable are especially important for the adjustment of Russian grand strategy, which constitutes the dependent variable in the present framework. The independent variable of systemic pressures from the IS constitutes a structural indicator originating from neorealist theory, stating that states must react to systemic pressures and incentives in an anarchic, insecure and often belligerent IS.⁵⁹ The importance and explanatory power of the structural indicator pressures from the IS with its implicit assumption of anarchy and insecurity ruling this level of analysis has been demonstrated many times. And this across such diverse theoretic schools as the different branches of realism and up to social constructivism, even if with different conclusions (Wendt: "Anarchy is what states make of it.").⁶⁰

It is important to note here, that the independent variable's origin in structural realism is not conserved in this thesis' framework. As Robert Keohane has pointed out, for most systemic theorists "the link between system structure and actor behavior is forged by the rationality assumption".⁶¹ This rationality assumption then allows for predictions that leaders will act accordingly to the incentives and pressures of their international environment. Neoclassical realist theorists argue to the contrary, that international power distributions and systemic pressures "can drive countries' behavior only by influencing the decisions of flesh and blood officials".⁶² Hence, they doubt the rationality assumption thoroughly and draw the conclusion that any foreign policy analyst must "explore in detail how each country's policymakers actually understand their situation."⁶³

Neoclassical realists believe in structural pressures and incentives just as neorealists do, but the former admit state-level variables such as perception and resource mobilization into their explanatory model of how states react to structural pressures in the international sphere.⁶⁴ These state-level variables, in this thesis perception and relative material power

⁵⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Amsterdam, London, Sydney: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 116-17.

⁶⁰ Rose, p. 152.

⁶¹ Cited in Rose, p. 158.

⁶² Cf. *ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Michiel Foulon, 'Neoclassical Realism: Challengers and Bridging Identities', in *International Studies Review* 17 (2015), 635-61, p. 639.

capabilities, then influence a state's foreign policy and grand strategy. Depending on the perceived geopolitical environment decision-makers find themselves in, they will make decision based on that perception. As Foulon states, "perceptions of the structure lead [states] to pursue policies within the structure of the system."⁶⁵ Adhering to this view, the thesis conceptualizes its independent variable as *perceived* pressures from the IS.

Since the thesis is concerned with Russian grand strategy adjustment mainly due to perceived pressures from the IS, it is further important to point out that it does not matter for this research framework if these perceived pressures are real or imagined. This might sound overly simplifying, but it helps to consider, for instance, if it really matters if NATO eastward enlargement is an objectively existent threat for Russia accurately perceived; or if it is a misperception of the process and the threat is only imagined by Russian decision-makers, when their very perception of threat remains the same? The political response is similar in either case, the perceived pressures being real or imagined. Only in hindsight decision-makers can perhaps judge accordingly if a threat has been real or not.

Another example is the Arctic region where Russian perceptions of pressures from the IS vary considerably, and structural realist theory fails to explain on the one hand the increased cooperation between Russia and the other four Arctic states (Denmark, USA, Canada, Norway) in areas like monitoring the marine environment and civilian traffic. On the other hand, it seems clear that Russia also perceives pressures in the region, and reacts to those with modernization and reorganization of the military infrastructure in the High North and the re- and new openings of various air and naval bases along the northern coast.⁶⁶

Regarding this thesis' framework and its design as a single-case study on Russia's grand strategy adjustment, it is not of crucial importance if the systemic pressures perceived by Russia are real or not. What matters is how Russian decision-making elites perceive these pressures from the IS, thus making a division of the independent variable into two separate ones unnecessary. This reduces the complexity of the framework, without neglecting the neoclassical realist premise that structural pressures emanating from the IS

⁶⁵ Foulon, p. 653.

⁶⁶ Cf. Valery Konyshchev and Alexander Sergunin, 'The Changing Role of Military Power in the Arctic', in *The Global Arctic Handbook*, Vol. 3, ed. by Matthias Finger and Lassi Heininen (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 171-95, p. 187.

first must be filtered through decision-makers perceptions.⁶⁷ That is, how Russian decision maker elites perceive their position in the IS and hence how they perceive pressures emanating from the IS. The intervening variable perception is thereby conceptualized as connected to the independent variable and both are treated as one.

The challenge is then to demonstrate the proposed causality between the adjustment of the four dimensions of grand strategy (military, economy, diplomacy, information) and the independent variable, and to show that this adjustment is moderated by relative material power capabilities. To accomplish this, an analytical narrative is built around major geopolitical events, demonstrating a correlation between those events and the discourse in major strategic paper publications. This serves to explain why Russian grand strategy changes: because of perceived systemic pressures and moderated by relative material power capabilities.

The moderating variable of relative material power capabilities comes from neoclassical realist theory and operates on the unit-level, describing the ability of a given state to extract and use its resources efficiently.⁶⁸ This includes not only military and economic strength, but also state extraction capabilities regarding taxes as well as natural and human resources. Connected to this, neoclassical realists point to the importance of state-society relations and the structure of a given state for mobilizing state power.⁶⁹ In the case of Russia and its huge spatial dimension, a strengthening of the federal center's control over the regions is also to be judged as a heightening in state extraction capabilities and thus as an increase in relative material power capabilities.⁷⁰

The causality between relative material power capability and foreign policy behavior is backed by Rose, who notes in his conception of neoclassical realism that “as their relative power rises states will seek more influence abroad, and as it falls their actions and ambitions will be scaled back accordingly.”⁷¹ This supports the hypothesis of present thesis, that *the higher the perceived systemic pressures from the IS, the more Russia will*

⁶⁷ Rose, p. 157.

⁶⁸ Rose, p. 156.

⁶⁹ Cf. Brian Rathbun, ‘A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism’, in *Security Studies* 17.2 (2008), 294–321, p. 296.

⁷⁰ Götz, p. 111.

⁷¹ Rose, p. 152.

adjust its grand strategy, to the extent its relative material power capabilities allow it to do so.

The intervening variable perception is crucial in the thesis' neoclassical realist research framework since it is filtering the independent variable, turning it from a purely objective measure to an intersubjectively perceived factor that influences Russian grand strategy adjustment. Because "there is insufficient connection between what the West thinks it sees in Russian actions and how the Russians themselves conceive them"⁷², it is important for both researchers and policy-makers concerned with Russia to consider the other's possible perception of events. In the case of Russia, Putin's more than twenty-year long position of power might in fact reduce the complexity of the problem of measuring the perception of international pressures by decision-making elites. This is at least what Monaghan implies, when he states that Putin is the main steersman of Russia's grand strategy.⁷³ To what extent this assumption might be accurate is hard to judge and remains debatable. Without wanting to overstate the point, it seems quite certain to assess that Putin's perception of international developments and his framing of those in important speeches do matter to a certain degree for Russian grand strategy adjustment, and even more for the discourse revolving around it.⁷⁴

The consequence of this crucial role of perception in the thesis is that the independent variable is not to be analyzed from an objective point of view (whereupon there is a discussion in Social Sciences if objectivity is an attainable goal in the first place)⁷⁵, but rather to be seen from a Russian perspective. The latter is mediated and measured through discourse analysis of official security documents such as the NSSs, and other official doctrines. The assumption here is that state leaderships want to communicate their strategies, or in other words their red lines and crucial interests, to other states as well as to their domestic audience: "a given text is used as a means of informing the foreign and

⁷² Andrew Monaghan, 'Putin's Way of War. The "War" in Russia's "Hybrid Warfare"', in *Parameters* 45.4 (2016), 65–74, p. 68.

⁷³ Monaghan, 'Putin's Russia', p. 1221.

⁷⁴ Cf. Andrei Piontkovsky, 'Putin's Russia as a Revisionist Power', in *Journal on Baltic Security* 1.1 (2015), 6–13, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁵ See David Goddard, 'Max Weber and the Objectivity of Social Science', in *History and Theory* 12.1 (1973), 1-22.

domestic audiences of Russia's core interests and even the possible logic of action in a conflict situation."⁷⁶

This serves several purposes: for one, the clear and open announcement of crucial interests or zones of interest can serve as a conflict mitigator because some states might not have noticed a certain red line; they might also be discouraged by the adversary's posture and the potential cost of conflict. Another purpose is to bring the domestic public into line, to proclaim a certain perspective in order to secure public support for policies with sometimes hurtful consequences. Such was the case with the publicly widely supported annexation of Crimea and the resulting sanctions by the West which continue to affect Russian elites, businesses, and the wider population.⁷⁷

However, while perception is relative and changes depending on the perspective, "Neoclassical realists assume that there is indeed something like an objective reality of relative power [...]. They do not assume, however, that states necessarily apprehend that reality accurately on a day-to-day basis."⁷⁸ Thus, neoclassical realism acknowledges that structures are important in influencing state behavior, but at the same time it raises the important question of how decision-making elites perceive these structures, proposing that their perception can influence foreign policy decisions significantly.⁷⁹

These basic assumptions of neoclassical realism are transferred into this thesis' framework, consisting of the independent variable perceived pressures emanating from the IS and of the moderating variable of relative material power capabilities, which influences the extent to which Russian grand strategy adjustment occurs.

⁷⁶ Katri Pynnöniemi, 'Russia's National Security Strategy: Analysis of Conceptual Evolution', in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31.2 (2018), 240–56, p. 242.

⁷⁷ See Nigel Gould-Davies, *Russia Sanctions: Myths and Lessons* (Chatham House, 2020).

⁷⁸ Rose, pp. 152-53.

⁷⁹ Cf. Rose, pp. 155-56.

2 Method and research design

According to Rose, “the neoclassical realist archetype is Thucydides' work *History of the Peloponnesian War*”,⁸⁰ which applies an analytic narrative to explore the cause of the war and then “describes how systemic incentives were translated through unit-level variables into the foreign policies of the various Greek city-states.”⁸¹ Hence, neoclassical realism has a methodological preference “for theoretically informed narratives, ideally supplemented by explicit counterfactual analysis, that trace the ways different factors combine to yield particular foreign policies.”⁸²

This preference of neoclassical realism for theoretically informed analytical narratives seems to have had its impact on this case study as well, which appears to be caused by the complicated, subjective, and fuzzy nature of high-policy decision-making processes. Nevertheless, the absence of the possibility for definite answers should not discourage one to ask the interesting but complicated, questions.

The research design of this thesis is a single case study with Russia's grand strategy adjustment as the object of the research; to be more precise, it is designed as a disciplined interpretive case study which “explains an event by applying a known theory to the new terrain.”⁸³ The event and at the same time the new terrain in this case is the grand strategy adjustment of Russia, and the known theory applied to explain the event is neoclassical realism. As Odell further notes, “The more explicit and systematic the use of theoretical concepts, the more powerful the application. Although this method may not test a theory, the case study shows that one or more known theories can be extended to account for a new event.”⁸⁴

As will be demonstrated in the following empirical sections, neoclassical realism can indeed be extended to explain grand strategy adjustment in the Russian case; in short, it finds that perceived pressures from the IS, moderated by Russia's relative material power capabilities did drive Russian grand strategy adjustment in the past and continue to do so. Regarding the merits of neoclassical realism, the following argument by Lobell et al.

⁸⁰ Rose, p. 153.

⁸¹ Rose, pp. 153-54.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Odell, p. 163.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

supports the decision to use a mid-range neoclassical realist framework for the single-case study design of the thesis:

Neoclassical realism seeks to explain variation in the foreign policies of the same state over time [...]. It makes no pretense about explaining broad patterns of systemic or recurring outcomes. Thus, a neoclassical realist hypothesis might explain the likely diplomatic, economic, and military responses of particular states to systemic imperatives, but it cannot explain the systemic consequences of those responses.⁸⁵

To demonstrate a Russian grand strategy adjustment within the thesis' framework, a two-part analytical narrative is performed, the first part looking at the years 2000-2009 with the background of the two major strategic documents published in these respective years, the NSC 2000 and the NSS of 2009. The second part is then concentrated on the years 2009 until 2018, the latter apparently the last year for which reliable data regarding military spending and GDP is available, at least for the time being. In the second section, the NSS of 2015 stands out in the conceptualized intertextual chain and is of utmost importance because of the upheaval of and shifts in the IS following the 2014 crisis over Ukraine.

Intertextuality is understood within the framework of CDA and following Fairclough:

intertextual analysis has an important mediating role in linking text to context. What intertextual analysis draws attention to is the discursive processes of text producers and interpreters, how they draw upon the repertoires of genres and discourses available within orders of discourse.⁸⁶

The order of discourse describes “a particular social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of making meaning, that is different discourses and genres.”⁸⁷ The ways of making meaning can be dominant or mainstream in a specific order of discourse, for instance when a certain, already well-known justification is used repeatedly; other ways of making meaning can take marginal or oppositional forms.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘The Statesman, the State, and the Balance of Power: Neoclassical Realism and the Politics of Grand Strategic Adjustment’, in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, ed. by Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-49, p. 18.

⁸⁶ Norman Fairclough, ‘Discourse and Text: Linguistic and Intertextual Analysis within Discourse Analysis’, in *Discourse & Society* 3.2 (1992), 193–217, p. 213.

⁸⁷ Norman Fairclough, ‘Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research’, in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. by Michael Meyer and Ruth Wodak, *Introducing Qualitative Methods* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2001), 121-38, p. 124.

⁸⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

CDA is defined as relational, dialectical, and transdisciplinary, meaning that it is “analysis of dialectical *relations between* discourse and other objects, elements or moments, as well as analysis of the ‘internal relations’ of discourse.”⁸⁹ How things like interests are expressed, or how they are framed through words does matter, even more so when uttered in high politics and the realm of the IS, as Jørgensen and Phillips argue: “language-as-discourse is *both* a form of action through which people can change the world *and* a form of action which is socially and historically situated and in a dialectical relationship with other aspects of the social.”⁹⁰ This means that a single text is not to be analyzed without attention to other political, social and historical circumstances, which necessitates a multi-disciplinary approach to any CDA with the aim to create an analysis that “depicts the relationship between text and context.”⁹¹

The discourse order in the case of Russian grand strategy is understood as “a system in the sense that it both shapes and is shaped by specific instances of language use.”⁹² This is to say that the discourse order, in this case, “is both structure and practice.”⁹³ In this conception, the discourse order then limits what can be said, though at the same time language users can change the discourse order through use of language, including bringing in new or other orders of discourse.⁹⁴

Perceived pressures from the IS as the independent variable must be judged from a Russian perspective. This is performed by CDA of Russian NSSs and, where adequate, in their importance similar documents like FPCs or military doctrines of the Russian Federation, for both parts of the analysis. These documents are conceptualized as part of an intertextual chain of strategic papers, which are then analyzed within the framework of *signaling*. The assumption here is that a given text or speech is utilized (in this case by Russian decision-makers and the producers of those texts) to signal core interests, as well as red lines, to foreign and domestic audiences.⁹⁵ Following this logic, it is assumed that the intertextual link between these documents over time consists in the adjusting grand

⁸⁹ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 4.

⁹⁰ Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), p. 62.

⁹¹ Jørgensen and Phillips, p. 71.

⁹² Jørgensen and Phillips, p. 72.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Pynnöniemi, p. 242.

strategy discourse, mainly due to shifting systemic pressures and Russian perception of those. This changing discourse is indicated by these documents addressed to foreign and domestic audiences.

Pynnöniemi argues for the viability of analysis of such strategic documents in her analysis of Russia's NSSs, demonstrating a clear evolution of Russian perception of the IS and its position therein, through comparison of the different strategic documents over time.⁹⁶ To demonstrate that an adjustment took place in Russian grand strategy, indicators are needed within the introduced dimensions of grand strategy. In the most crucial informational dimension, the strategic documents outlined above are used to demonstrate Russian grand strategy adjustment.

In the diplomacy dimension, treaties and agreements serve as indicators for an adjusting Russian grand strategy, such as the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and diplomatic events like the recent Russia-Africa summit in Sochi. In the economic dimension, abroad investments, economic agreements, and economic coercive measures are considered. In the military dimension, finally, military spending, military build-up, and military strategy serve as indicators, the latter conceptualized as “the direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purposes of policy.”⁹⁷

While all these dimensions are part of grand strategy, their importance within the latter's discourse varies greatly, depending on the respective context of a situation. For instance, while in the analyzed strategic documents the military dimension is given more prominence in the context of relations with the West and NATO, the economic dimension is the most important one regarding China. Accordingly, the thesis does not treat each of those dimensions equally, neither does it admit equal attention to them. Rather, the focus of the analysis shifts in a similar way as the strategic documents do, depending on the context within which the respective strategy is embedded.

While relatively young in political science, perhaps due to its origin in discourse studies performed by linguists and discourse analysts,⁹⁸ CDA can be used to show a change in the discourse of grand strategy by analyzing Russian strategic papers over time. For the purpose of this thesis, the CDA serves to demonstrate an adjustment in Russian grand

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 3.

⁹⁸ Cf. Teun A. van Dijk, ‘What is Political Discourse Analysis?’, in *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 11 (1997), 11–52, p. 12.

strategy as well as to assess Russian perception of the independent variable, and is therefore mainly concerned with the three NSSs of 2000, 2009, and 2015. Where it is adequate, the analysis is extended to in their hierarchy similarly situated documents like FPCs. These key strategic documents, produced by main political bodies and figures of the Russian state, are assumed to constitute an intertextual chain indicating the grand strategy discourse of the country. They are also assumed to signal Russian perception of international pressures emanating from the IS. Each NSS on its own constitutes a communicative event, which “not only reproduce orders of discourse, but can also change them through creative language use.”⁹⁹

The multitude and frequency in which such strategic papers are published by diverse Russian agencies indicate a vivid strategic discourse within the Russian state. The high importance the government credits those documents further supports the validity of the selected documents as indicators for Russian grand strategy adjustment. Regarding the reliability, Isabelle Facon admits that “Russian political scientists often state that the practical importance of these documents should not be exaggerated.”¹⁰⁰ Yet, she goes on, “they nonetheless offer a valuable synthesis of Russia’s world vision.”¹⁰¹

Further, the selection of the NSSs as main sources is grounded in the research objective of securing comparability, as well as in the description of these papers in their respective introduction as central and extensive strategic documents, foundational for the overall strategic direction of Russia in the international sphere and domestically.¹⁰² Godzimirski argues for the first-rank importance of the NSC (and implicitly for the two subsequent updates of the NSC in 2009 and 2015) for the analysis of grand strategy adjustment by referring to the Russian concept of ‘total security’:

The idea of the security of the Russian people, and its spatial, political and territorial organisation in the Russian state, has been one of the most central organising ideas in the history of modern Russia. This idea of 'total security' currently also regulates Russia's relations with the outside world. That is why the concept of national security should be seen as the most important guideline for the Russian political leadership in pursuing the country's strategic goals.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Isabelle Facon, *Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine and their implications for the EU* (Brussels: European Union, 2017), p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Facon, p. 6.

¹⁰³ Jakub M. Godzimirski, ‘Russian national security concepts 1997 and 2000: A comparative analysis’, in *European Security* 9.4 (2000), 73–91, p. 75.

The terms ‘national security’ and ‘national interests’ are closely interlinked with most conceptions of grand strategy in the literature, the latter sometimes used interchangeably for grand strategy goals. This comes quite naturally if one considers security and state interests crucial for state behavior, as most IR schools do. However, in this thesis both terms are not clearly defined but seen as crucial parts of grand strategy; while not identical per definition, national interests can amount to the grand strategy objectives themselves. One considerable setback in terms of data availability and thus reliability is that the NSS of 2009 could not be found in an official English-language edition, leaving the analysis of this document therefore exclusively based on secondary literature; despite the existence of this flaw, the reliability in this case is intended to be secured through the usage of various analyses on the matter.

In regard to the independent variable perceived pressures from the IS and its operationalization, it is important to emphasize again that, in the theoretical framework of this thesis, it is not decisive if the pressures are *objectively existent*. Rather, it matters how Russia (or the decision-making elites) *perceive* these factors, hence also how they articulate their perception of those in strategic papers, and, most importantly, how they let these factors influence Russia’s grand strategy adjustment.¹⁰⁴

As Foulon explains with the example of American perception of shifting international pressures and resulting threats through the economic rise of China, it does not matter if such a perception is objectively accurate, because “the perceived international environment [becomes] real today by implementing foreign policy in the perceived geopolitical context.”¹⁰⁵

The through discourse analysis of these documents demonstrated adjustment of Russian grand strategy 2000-2009 and 2009-2018 is analyzed in the empirical section on correlation with the independent variable and the moderating variable. Perceived pressures from the IS are demonstrated for both time periods through examination of the various official documents and, more importantly, through qualitative analysis of major geopolitical events from a Russian perspective. Much of this work’s analysis of perceived systemic pressures revolves around major geopolitical crises because those tend to change international structures and hence systemic pressures most significantly.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Foulon, p. 642.

¹⁰⁵ Foulon, p. 652.

The relative material power capabilities of Russia as the moderating variable are measured by quantitative methods: data from the World Bank databank serves as an indicator for the military dimension (military spending in US dollars), and delivers also the indicator for the economic dimension (GDP in US dollars) of the moderating variable for the research period. These two indicators are supplemented by qualitative analysis of state capacity, to show rise and decline of Russia's relative material power capabilities over the course of the two decades in question.

A downside in terms of reliability of the data is the authors' personal lack of native Russian language skills, and this limited knowledge made it impossible to use some primary sources. Where there were official English-language publications of the documents in question those were used, but in other cases it had to be drawn on secondary literature.

The analysis is performed, as described above, with a different set of methods but with the same goal: to support the arguments of the analytical narrative in order to explain Russian grand strategy adjustment. In the following first section of the analysis, it will be looked at international developments which affected Russia and its relative material power capabilities in the years 2000-2009.

3 Analysis

3.1 Power, pressure, and perception from 2000-2008

As others have pointed out, Russia during the upheaval of the 1990s did not have the potential nor the capacities to follow or adjust a possible grand strategy.¹⁰⁶ However, Andrei Tsygankov is of the opinion that “By the time Putin arrived on the national scene in 1999–2000, Russia’s political class had already arrived at a consensus regarding the country’s grand strategy.”¹⁰⁷ Hence, it makes sense to set the timeframe of a case study on Russian grand strategy adjustment as starting with Putin’s inauguration as (briefly prime minister and then) president. Further, at the end of the 1990s Russia had achieved the most pressing national interests after the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely securing its territorial sovereignty as well as its international status as a full-fledged member of the international community.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, the grand strategy discourse in Russia did not start with Putin. It is rather to be seen as an ever-ongoing process, which is adjusted due to perceived external pressures and domestic power capabilities.

With the nation’s sovereignty and territorial integrity assured, the consensus among Russian elites could consolidate around two crucial objectives in the international sphere: “*global influence as an independent power and dominance in the former soviet region.*”¹⁰⁹ Arguably, this consensus by the political elite framed the discourse order of Russian grand strategy, by defining the way in which different discourses are connected.¹¹⁰ That connection is recognizable in the official strategic papers at different points in time, conceptualized in this thesis as communicative events constructing the intertextual discourse order of Russian grand strategy.¹¹¹ Starting with the NSC 2000, various discourses like for instance that of national security or national interests, revolve around the two main motifs, are developed and used to create and preserve a dominant Russian grand strategy discourse.

¹⁰⁶ Pynnöniemi, p. 255.

¹⁰⁷ Tsygankov, p. 31.

¹⁰⁸ Godzimirski, p. 75.

¹⁰⁹ Tsygankov, p. 31. [emphasis added, F.H.]

¹¹⁰ Cf. Fairclough, ‘Critical discourse analysis as a method’, p. 124.

¹¹¹ Jørgensen and Phillips, p. 73.

Looking at the discourse order in the NSC 2000, it is noticeable that the first section of the document bears the title “Russia in the world community”.¹¹² It therefore admits the priority of the international sphere in relation to the domestic one, and describes the IS in its first paragraph as “undergoing dynamic transformation.”¹¹³ The prioritization of the international sphere is notable, even more so if one looks at the most difficult decade the country just passed domestically, especially regarding the stricken state of the economy, society, and the military during the 1990s.

The document then goes on in describing “two mutually exclusive tendencies”¹¹⁴ occurring in the international sphere: one manifesting in the “rise of a multipolar world [with] Economic, political, science and technological, environmental and information factors playing an ever-increasing role.”¹¹⁵ The other tendency consisting in “attempts to create an international relations structure based on domination by developed Western countries [...] under US leadership.”¹¹⁶

Although the NSC directly calls out the US as leading these attempts to domination in the IS on its first page, it still emphasizes first the multipolar world with its increased possibilities for cooperation and integration, and vows to support this development. However, the next paragraph then describes the IS as competitive and inhabited by “a number of states”¹¹⁷ which want to increase their global influence, “including by creating weapons of mass destruction.”¹¹⁸ Through this inclusion of the discourse over weapons of mass destruction, the NSC concludes that “The significance of the military and security aspects of international relations continues to remain substantial.”¹¹⁹

The first outlined grand strategy objective, global influence as an independent power in the IS, is clearly expressed under section II of the NSC, “Russia’s national interests”, as “Russia’s national interests in the international sphere lie in upholding its sovereignty and strengthening its positions as a great power and as one of the influential centers of a multipolar world.”¹²⁰

¹¹² National Security Concept of the Russian Federation (NSC) (2000): I. Russia in the world community.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ NSC (2000): II. Russia’s national interests.

The national interests discourse in the NSC 2000 revolving around the sovereignty motif hints at Russia's perception and experience of the war in Chechnya, which continued to affect Russia's relative material power capabilities in the early 2000s, and threatened its territorial, political and social coherence.¹²¹ In the case of the second Chechnya war from 1999 to 2009, the beforementioned practice of changing existing discourses through the use of language and/or the introduction of other discourses can be observed. Putin framed this conflict, which was arguably quite important for his rising popularity in 1999, as a pure terrorist threat, and in an interview in mid-2000 he painted the picture of a "creation of an extremist international along the so-called arc of instability stretching from the Philippines to Kosovo."¹²²

This is not to say that there was no (transnational) terrorist threat emanating from Chechnya, but that the terrorist discourse was used to declare "the entire Chechen population to combatants and all combatants to potential terrorists, absolving Moscow of its obligation to protect them during its military operations."¹²³ In a similar line it can be argued then that the terrorist discourse over Chechnya served within the national security discourse to justify the grand strategy discourse; the latter consisting first and foremost in the upholding of its sovereignty in the NSC 2000. The motif of bringing in the terrorist threat discourse as a means to justify certain ends recurs further in Syria fifteen years later, as will be shown in the next section of this analysis.

The second objective is not as clearly nor as prominently expressed in the NSC; it is indicated, however, in section IV of the document, "Ensuring the national security of the Russian Federation".¹²⁴ As part of a list concerned with the direction of Russian foreign policy, the document emphasizes Russia's prerogative of "protecting the lawful rights and interests of Russian citizens abroad, particularly with the use of political, economic and other measures for these purposes."¹²⁵ Directly in the next point, the document highlights then the aim of "developing integration processes within the Commonwealth of Independent States that meet the interests of Russia."¹²⁶

¹²¹ Hanna Notte, 'Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals', in *Middle East Policy* 23.1 (2016), 59–74, p. 60.

¹²² Cited *ibid.*

¹²³ Notte, p. 62.

¹²⁴ NSC (2000): IV. Ensuring the national security of the Russian Federation.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

What comes to mind here is not so much *what* the document states, but *how* it does so. The inclusion of the words ‘other measures’ indicates the willingness to use military force if necessary, and similarly, the specification in the second quote ‘that meet the interests of Russia’ indicates the latter’s objective of dominance, or hegemony, in the post-Soviet space.

It is apparent though, that the second overarching objective of Russian grand strategy, hegemony in the former Soviet region, is not as clearly expressed in the grand strategy discourse within the NSC 2000. Yet, if the following assessment of Bettina Renz holds true, the dominance of Russia in the post-Soviet region was at no point threatened, at least in the military dimension:

Even at its lowest point, Russian conventional military power far outvalled any of the other former Soviet states, at any point of the post-Cold War period, due to the sheer disparity in size and the fact that their militaries were besieged by similar levels of neglect.¹²⁷

This would then render a distinct expression of this grand strategy objective in the NSC 2000 less important, and would thus explain the mere indications of it, in contrast to the clearly pronounced objective of strengthening Russia’s position in the IS as a great power. Hence, the latter constitutes a dominant way of “making meaning”, thereby setting the discursive frame in which social action can take place.¹²⁸

The economic situation with all its implications domestically and internationally figures more prominently throughout the document. This implies that, as Godzimirski observes, “the domestic problems are seen as crucial, not least due to the fact that they limit Russia's choices in pursuing its international ambitions.”¹²⁹ Consequently, this argues for the supposed correlation of this thesis between relative material power capabilities and Russian grand strategy adjustment. It further supports the thesis’ hypothesis, that Russia’s relative material power capabilities moderate the extent to which grand strategy adjustment occurs.

Regarding the grand strategy discourse in the NSC, a quite ambivalent picture emerges, pending between the emphasis on possibilities of increased cooperation in a multipolar

¹²⁷ Bettina Renz, ‘Why Russia is Reviving Its Conventional Military Power’, in *Parameters* 46.2 (2016), 23–36, p. 29.

¹²⁸ Fairclough, ‘Critical discourse analysis as a method’, p. 124.

¹²⁹ Godzimirski, p. 79.

IS under the rule of international law, and the need for a strong security apparatus, capable of securing Russia's national security in the face of the Western powers under leadership of the US and their quest for dominance within the IS.

Turning then to the independent variable supposed to influence the Russian grand strategy discourse in this thesis' framework, perceived pressures emanating from the IS, the NSC 2000 delivers a detailed list of international and domestic threats which are perceived as endangering Russia's national security and national interests. National security and national interests are discourses within the discourse order of grand strategy, used to justify and able to modify the latter.¹³⁰

The perceived threats constitute the third section of the document and are listened under the title "Threats to the Russian Federation's national security."¹³¹ The domestic challenges to the national security, first and foremost the state of the economy, take up more than half of this section and are described as having "a comprehensive character and are due primarily to a substantial contraction in the gross domestic product."¹³²

The then described threats in the international sphere are plenty, but the most important ones which put the most systemic pressure on Russia are "the strengthening of military-political blocs and alliances, above all NATO's eastward expansion."¹³³ Further the "possible appearance of foreign military bases and large troop contingents in direct proximity to Russia's borders"¹³⁴ and the "outbreak and escalation of conflicts near the state border of the Russian Federation and the external borders of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States."¹³⁵

Whereas the first concern is expressed straightforward and signals clearly that NATO eastward expansion is perceived as a threat to Russia's national security, the following two points leave room for interpretation. The first concern seems to address NATO again, because another potential adversary who would consider such a step or even had the capabilities to do so is hardly conceivable, in 2000 even more so than today. The last perceived threat then, the possible outbreak of conflicts near the state border of Russia,

¹³⁰ Jørgensen and Phillips, p. 73.

¹³¹ NSC (2000): III. Threats to the Russian Federation's national security.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

appears reasonable, but the extension in the following phrase to the external borders of the CIS member states implies a Russian zone of interest which includes those states. A further implication is then that Russia would consider such an event as a threat to its national security and act upon it.

The expressed main national interest for Russia in the international sphere, consisting in “upholding its sovereignty and strengthening its positions as a great power and as one of the influential centers of a multipolar world”¹³⁶, is a first indicator of the influence of perceived international pressures on grand strategy. The emphasis on the need to defend Russia’s sovereignty hints at the Kosovo crisis, where NATO, contrary to Russia’s interests and, as Medvedev argues, as part of “a certain power discourse – the post-Cold War dominant moral discourse of the ‘West’”¹³⁷, started a military intervention in Serbia without a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution. This was and continues to be therefore considered illegal under international law, at least from a Russian perspective, and stoked resentments on the Russian side.¹³⁸ In a similar line and accumulating to the negative perceptual experience of Serbia, the Iraq war 2003 served to strengthen the perception on the Russian side of the US and its allies circumventing international law to realize their international objectives.¹³⁹

The conflicts in Serbia and Iraq and the respective approaches to their solution influenced Russian perception of international pressures significantly over the years. The peak of mutual alienation with the US and other Western countries was reached in February 2008 when Kosovo declared its independence and separation from Serbia, officially recognized by many countries of the international community.¹⁴⁰

With these experiences and with the collective memory of powerlessness during the 1990s, what Russia needed in order to influence international developments for its benefit was, put simply, power. The country’s relative material power capabilities in 2000 were still weak, expressed in a dysfunctional economy and a relatively low gross domestic product (GDP), as well as high inflation, inadequate state capacity to e.g. collect taxes or

¹³⁶ NSC (2000): II. Russia’s national interests.

¹³⁷ Sergei Medvedev, ‘Kosovo: a European *fin de siècle*’, in *Mapping European security after Kosovo*, ed. by Peter van Ham and Sergei Medvedev (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 17.

¹³⁸ Godzimirski, p. 82.

¹³⁹ Facon, p. 13.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Keir Giles, *Russia’s National Security Strategy to 2020* (Rome: NATO Defense College, Research Division, 2009), pp. 5-6.

prosecute tax fraud, widespread corruption, old and burdened infrastructure and technology etc.¹⁴¹

The military, traditionally one of the most important Russian tools for the completion of foreign policy objectives and great power projection,¹⁴² constitutes another important indicator for Russia's relative material power capabilities. The Russian military suffered total neglect during the 1990s, prompting the Duma in 1998 to assess the armed forces a "full-scale disintegration, and [inability] to carry out strategic operations."¹⁴³

However, this low point of Russian relative material power capabilities around 1999 should remain the nadir, and in the next two presidential terms under Putin until 2008 these capabilities did increase substantially. Figure 1 on the next page illustrates the significant increase in both total GDP in current US dollars and total military spending in US dollars, as well as their correlation, for the timeframe between 1998 and 2008. For instance, the GDP in 2008 was more than six times higher than that of 2000, and the same holds true for the military spending, which surpassed 50 billion US dollars in 2008.

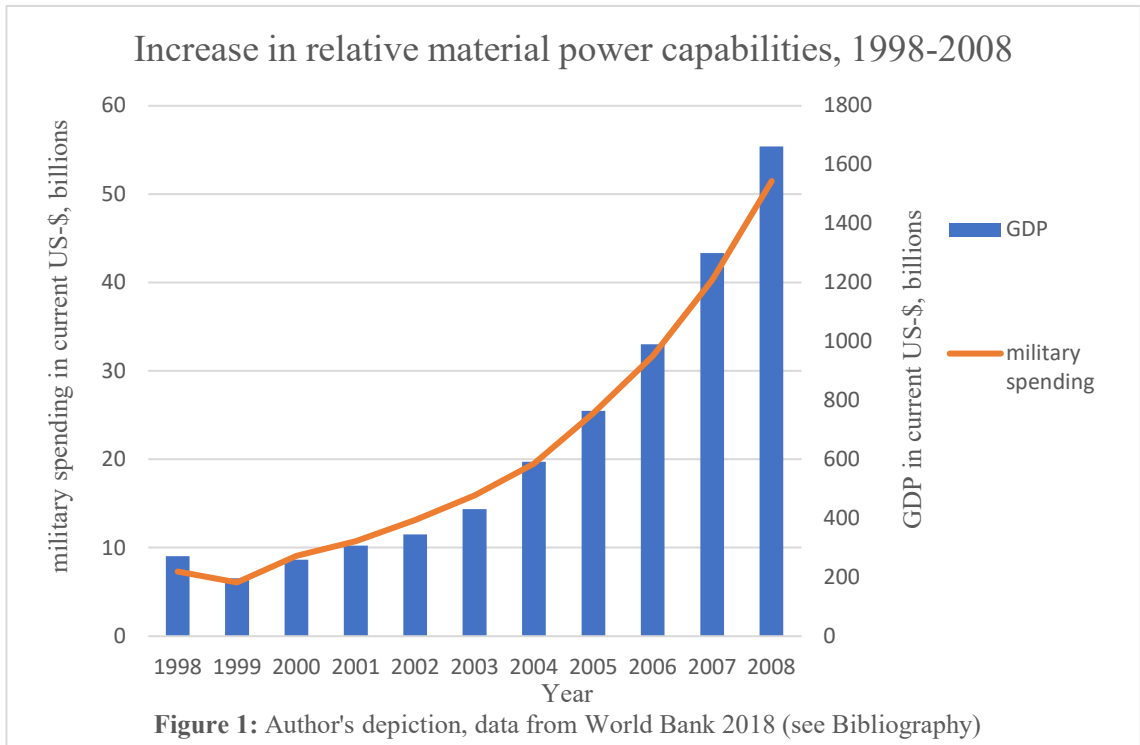
Military spending in the World Bank databank is described as percentage of the GDP,¹⁴⁴ which increases from 3.3% in 2000 to 3.8% in 2002 and 3.7% in 2003, but then remains relatively stable at around 3.3% until 2008. Since this can convey the false impression of stable military spending, the percentage values were translated to absolute spending in current billion US dollars. As can be seen in Figure 1, because of the strong increase in GDP, stable proportions of the GDP dedicated to military spending do not mean that the latter remains stable in absolute numbers. Instead, military spending rose from its nadir at roughly 6 billion US dollars in 1999 to over 51 billion US dollars in 2008; this means a six-fold increase in military spending in just nine years, with an average annual raise of roughly 5.6 billion US dollars.

¹⁴¹ See Graeme P. Herd, 'Russia: Systemic Transformation or Federal Collapse?', in *Journal of Peace Research* 36.3 (1999), 259-69, p. 260.

¹⁴² Renz, p. 28.

¹⁴³ Cited in Herd, p. 265.

¹⁴⁴ The World Bank uses different sources for their calculation of military spending figures, such as the SIPRI databank and secondary sources. To reduce the complexity of gathering data from different sources, this case study draws solely on World Bank data regarding Russian GDP and military spending.



This data strongly indicates a significant increase in Russian relative material power, at least in economic and military terms, during the first period of this analysis from 2000 to 2008. Regarding this thesis' neoclassical realist framework, this would mean that Russia became increasingly capable of following a more active grand strategy due to its increased potential to do so. Further, if the pressures from the IS are perceived as strong in Russia, it will consequently adjust its grand strategy.

The war in Chechnya had its own implications for Russian relative material power capabilities, especially regarding the military. The Russian armed forces at the time of Putin's entrance into office were no match for former Soviet military might and power projection capabilities, let alone concentrated Western power in the form of NATO and the US.¹⁴⁵ The problems to alone assemble a force of roughly 65,000 soldiers for Chechnya after the Kremlin's decision in 1999 to send in ground troops again, can fairly

¹⁴⁵ Cf. US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *Russia Military Power. Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (2017), p. 12.

<www.dia.mil/Military-Power-Publications> [accessed 17 May 2020]

be assumed to have influenced Putin's perception of the Russian military and its considerable weaknesses.¹⁴⁶

In a similar line regarding Russian military weakness around 2000, it is argued that the NATO intervention in Serbia 1999 and Russia's relatively powerless position in that crisis influenced the Russian perception of the necessary reforms the Russian military had to undergo. The NATO operation 'Allied Force' over Serbia "marked a watershed in Russia's assessment of its own military requirements and defense priorities",¹⁴⁷ as Alexei Arbatov, former Duma member and well-known expert on international security issues, assesses.

Albeit these considerable rifts in US-Russia relations over Serbia as well as, to a lesser extent, over Chechnya, it is noteworthy that post 9/11 "Russia pursued broader strategic objectives in the U.S.-Russian relationship. [This] included [...] the removal of the Taliban from Afghanistan."¹⁴⁸ This objective could not be achieved by Russia alone in the early 2000s due to its lacking relative material power capabilities. Thus, it meant that "Russia welcomed U.S. military action against the Taliban regime"¹⁴⁹, which in turn contributed to a general perception of possibilities for further intensified cooperation between Russia and the US, under the leadership of Putin and George W. Bush, respectively.¹⁵⁰

However, this atmosphere of possible enhanced cooperation with the US cooled down very quickly with the prelude of the US-led Iraq war in 2003 and the resulting Russian alignment with China, France, Germany, and other countries in opposition against the war, thereby reviving Russia's importance in international affairs.¹⁵¹ The war and the multilateral action under the leadership of the US, again without being sanctioned by the UN and at least debatable regarding international law, resembled too much the Western approach in Kosovo. This perception was already formulated and signaled in the NSC 2000, when it warned of "NATO's shift to the practice of using military force outside its

¹⁴⁶ Facon, p. 13.

¹⁴⁷ Cited in Renz, p. 26.

¹⁴⁸ Notte, p. 63.

¹⁴⁹ Notte, p. 64.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ See Ilai Z. Saltzman, 'Russian Grand Strategy and the United States in the 21st Century', in *Orbis* 56.4 (2012), 547–64, p. 548.

zone of responsibility and without UN Security Council authorization.”¹⁵² The Iraq war is thus considered to have strengthened Putin’s perception of the need for a revived and potent military, capable of protecting and serving Russian interests abroad.¹⁵³

Contributing to this perception, it seems quite clear that from a Russian perspective, NATO enlargements 1999 with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, 2004 with Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, and 2009 with Albania and Croatia eastwards did not serve to reassure Russia of the West’s benign intentions. It rather looked like a strategy of containment aimed at Russia and its aspirations to be recognized and respected as a great power in the international sphere, as Mearsheimer and others have already argued.¹⁵⁴

Especially the 2004 expansion round reinforced Russian threat perception of the shifting pressures in the IS, with the new NATO member states Estonia and Latvia sharing a border of roughly 250 kilometers length with Russia, constituting a formidable bridgehead for possible NATO operations against Russian territory; not to forget Lithuania, which plays an even greater strategic role for Russia as a land bridge connecting Russia via Belarus with the geopolitically most important Kaliningrad exclave.¹⁵⁵ In his neoclassical realist analysis of Russia’s Baltic policy, Götz concludes that Russia only did not follow through its many explicit warnings against the accession of the region to NATO because it did not possess the state capacity in the early 2000s, what we term relative material power capabilities, to do so: “The problem was that the Baltics had used the window of opportunity provided by Russia’s internal weakness in the previous years to join NATO.”¹⁵⁶

The developments outlined above were evidently perceived by decision-making elites as pressures from the IS, threatening Russia’s interests and the grand strategy to achieve them. Putin himself expressed such concerns in his landmark speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007.¹⁵⁷ In a 2008 analysis of Russia’s European policy for the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Janina Sleivyte writes:

¹⁵² NCS 2000: III. Threats to the Russian Federation's national security.

¹⁵³ Cf. Facon, p. 13.

¹⁵⁴ Mearsheimer, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Götz, p. 105.

¹⁵⁶ Götz, p. 112.

¹⁵⁷ See Facon, p. 4.

In 2006, it was clear that Russia left Western orbit entirely and started to create their own 'Moscow-centred system', focussing primarily on the promoting Russia's economic expansion in the CIS, expanding relations with China and India, as well as with unpredictable states, such as Iran, Syria and Venezuela.¹⁵⁸

This turn towards a more independent and self-confident foreign policy was made possible due to high energy prices and thus the overall recovery of the Russian economy in Putin's first and second presidential terms; put differently, Russia's relative material power capabilities in the economic and military sphere increased significantly as indicated by the growth of the GDP as well as of the military spending.¹⁵⁹ The increased power, according to the neoclassical realist framework of this thesis, was then expressed in Russia being more assertive in its foreign policy behavior, in order to reach its grand strategy objectives.¹⁶⁰ This supports this thesis' hypothesis, that *the higher the perceived systemic pressures from the IS, the more Russia will adjust its grand strategy, to the extent its relative material power capabilities allow it to do so.*

In a sense, more grand strategy adjustment can be translated into a bolder, more assertive foreign policy in order to reach the grand strategic objectives of the country. However, the discourse analysis of the second document in the intertextual link of strategic papers, the NSS of 2009, is performed in the next section and is intended to demonstrate an adjustment of Russian grand strategy in form of an adjusted discourse of the latter.

A case in point of a more confident and assertive foreign policy is then Russia's reaction to the Georgian artillery shelling of Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital on the evening of 7 August 2008, which started the Russo-Georgian war. Russia defeated the Georgian military within five days rather quickly, occupying the separatist regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well as parts of Georgia.¹⁶¹

The war was seen by many Western observers at the time as a means for Russia to signal its readiness to protect its interests, especially in its zone of interest, and if necessary with military force. This thesis disagrees with Ellison, who denies the existence of a Russian grand strategy which in any way included a possible war scenario with Georgia over

¹⁵⁸ Janina Sleivyte, *Russia's European Agenda and The Baltic States*, The Shrivenham Papers, 7 (Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁵⁹ See Figure 1 on page 37 of this work.

¹⁶⁰ Sleivyte, p. 7.

¹⁶¹ See Brian J. Ellison, 'Russian Grand Strategy in the South Ossetia War', in *Demokratizatsiya* 19.4 (2011), 343–66, pp. 343–44.

rapprochement to the West or the possibility of Georgian NATO membership. It is rather argued, within the logic of the thesis' framework, that such a scenario was indeed seen as possible by Russian decision-making elites and thus part of a larger, a grand, strategy. To support this argument, it is worth reminding that it was the NSC 2000, which already pointed out that threats in the international sphere consist, between others, in "the strengthening of military-political blocs and alliances, above all NATO's eastward expansion."¹⁶²

This perception of international pressures has evidently been expressed in the NSC 2000 and thus supports the argument that, contrary to Ellison's claim, Russian decision-making elites were indeed aware of this threat as early as 2000 and planned accordingly for the eventuality of this scenario taking place. This is not to say that the grand strategy concretely planned the war with Georgia, but rather that the possibility of a country situated in Russia's zone of interest joining an adversary security architecture such as NATO was considered a threat emanating from the IS. For such an event had to be planned for accordingly, including the possible use of military force to prevent this scenario. The NATO summit in April 2008 in Bucharest, where the admittance of Georgia and Ukraine was considered by the alliance, is certain to have reinforced that perception in Russia.¹⁶³ Thus, according to the neoclassical realist framework in this thesis, the heightened systemic pressures perceived in Russia drove the country to adjust its grand strategy, and because, in contrast to 2004, its relative material power capabilities were high enough to do so in 2008.

In regard of the domestic power capabilities, a remarkable recovery evidently occurred from 2000 onwards, until the financial crisis broke out in 2008, when there was a moderate drop in Russia's GDP for the first time since 2000.¹⁶⁴ This supports the hypothesis that Russia adjusts its grand strategy, in this instance through an adjustment of its foreign policy means directed at Georgia, because of external pressures emanating from the IS, and moderated by its relative material power capabilities; after all, a state can only follow ambitious strategies if it has the means to do so.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² NSC (2000), III. Threats to the Russian Federation's national security.

¹⁶³ Cf. Mearsheimer, p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ See Figure 1 on page 37 of this work.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Renz, p. 29.

Putin's role in the restoration of the country's relative material power capabilities is highlighted by Götz, who assesses that

Putin's authoritarian tendencies are not the root cause but rather a facilitating factor, in the sense that they have allowed the Russian government to rebuild state capacity within a short time span. This, in turn, has enabled Moscow to act upon external pressures and opportunities in a more systematic fashion.¹⁶⁶

When Dmitri Medvedev took office as president in 2008, some observers described a change to more benign tones in Russian foreign policy towards its Eastern European neighbors and the US. This is to some degree due to the so-called 'reset' in the Obama-administration's Russia policy, visible in US-support for a Russian entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), the lifting of US-sanctions on the Russian arms export agency "Rosoboroneksport" against reassurance that they will not sell their S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems to Iran, and the US granting Russia a greater role in the Middle East peace process.¹⁶⁷

However, these developments did not remove the contradictory Russia-US policy stances on such important and diverse themes as democratization and integration processes in Eastern Europe, influence zones in Russia's 'near abroad', the 'new great game' in Central Asia, and energy policies whose outcome influence Europe's energy security significantly.¹⁶⁸ The energy crisis with Ukraine in 2009 and the ongoing dispute with the US over their planned installation of an anti-ballistic missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic seemed to imply evidently a continuation of Russian foreign policy behavior observed under Putin's presidency.¹⁶⁹

The Russian reaction to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia for instance, reflected the declarations made in the FPC published in July 2008, where it says that "Russia supports collective actions and wants to be a guarantor of security, but it also has every right to act unilaterally when its national interests are involved."¹⁷⁰ In this the national interests discourse is found again, which is part of the discourse order of grand strategy. This

¹⁶⁶ Götz, p. 111.

¹⁶⁷ Stephen J. Blank, 'Beyond the Reset Policy: Current Dilemmas of U.S.–Russia Relations', in *Comparative Strategy*, 29.4 (2010), 333–67, p. 334.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Sophia Dimitrakopoulou and Andrew Liaropoulos, 'Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020: A Great Power in the Making?', in *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 4.1 (2010), 35–42, pp. 36–37.

¹⁷⁰ Dimitrakopoulou and Liaropoulos, p. 37.

indicates a first adjustment, certainly in means, of Russian grand strategy under Medvedev. The two main objectives of Russian grand strategy in this framework, hegemony in the post-Soviet space and a strong international voice as a recognized great power in a multipolar system, remained constant, but the foreign policy to achieve them grew more self-confident and assertive.

Certainly, the series of military reforms started in 2008 under then Defense Secretary Anatoliy Serdyukov, with the aim to free the Russian armed forces from their Soviet legacy of a mobilization force with outdated equipment, reflected lessons learned from Georgia, and indicates an adjustment in military strategy.¹⁷¹ This in turn affects the Russian grand strategy, since the military constitutes a crucial dimension thereof. The reforms had the goal of transforming a huge army with millions of reservists, structured around divisions and originally intended to fight a major interstate war most likely against NATO, towards a smaller, professional army able to deploy swiftly to crisis zones around the globe.¹⁷² This transformation indicates an adjustment in Russian grand strategy, because it takes place in order to reach the changed political and military strategic objectives from around 2011 onwards, assessed in the following section. That is power projection beyond the neighborhood of Russia in limited operations, as seen in Syria, and the preservation of Russia's hegemony in the post-Soviet space, as exemplified by the Ukraine crisis.¹⁷³

The reforms were initiated in light of, among other things, the experiences of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, where the Russian armed forces did complete their objectives though reportedly had problems with mobility, logistics, and communication in the field.¹⁷⁴ However, because the process of transformation is complex, expensive and hence slow, it is presently still ongoing; a more detailed examination of military developments is included in the next section of the thesis, because the reform efforts after their stabilization in early 2012 are easier to recognize, and thus judge.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Cf. US DIA, p. 12.

¹⁷² Facon, p. 10.

¹⁷³ Facon, p. 11.

¹⁷⁴ US DIA, pp. 12-13.

¹⁷⁵ See Keir Giles, *Assessing Russia's Reorganized and Rearmed Military* (Washington, Chicago: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2017), p. 2.

The first section of the analysis has demonstrated that a Russian grand strategy discourse was already in place when Putin took the presidential office in 2000, which was then reproduced through the use of words in the NSC 2000. The dominant discourse order of Russian grand strategy therein revolves around two main objectives, influence as an independent great power in a multipolar IS, and hegemony in the post-Soviet space. The former represents a modified discourse, after Russia had achieved its objectives at the end of the 1990s of preserving its territorial integrity and national sovereignty. The discourse around the objective of hegemony in the post-Soviet space was reproduced in the NSC 2000. In this document, National interests and national security discourses are used as different ways of making meaning and as justification of the grand strategy objectives. With the increase of Russia's domestic power capabilities towards 2008, its foreign policy became more assertive and self-confident. The objective of hegemony in the post-Soviet region, which was already indicated in the NSC 2000, was followed through increasingly assertive in word and deed, evidently signaled in the FPC 2008 as well as indicated through the Russo-Georgian war.

This adjustment of Russian grand strategy, following this thesis' neoclassical realist framework, was thus driven by perceived pressures from the IS, and moderated by Russia's relative material power capabilities. This resulted in a more assertive foreign policy when the perceived pressures from the IS increased, and when an adjustment was materially possible through increased power capabilities, the Russo-Georgian war being a case in point.

The adjustment of Russian grand strategy is demonstrated in the following section by applying CDA to the NSS to 2020, which was published in 2009 and which constitutes another crucial document in the intertextual chain of grand strategy discourse as conceptualized in this work. The FPC 2013 serves as another source for the CDA, as do the NSS 2015 and the FPC 2016. To further support the thesis' hypothesis, the next section will move the theoretical framework forward and apply it on the years 2009-2018.

3.2 Grand strategy adjustment 2009-2018

The NSS to 2020 was published in May 2009 and was assumed by many observers as a reaction and strategic adjustment following the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, although the drafting of the new document began already in 2004, then stalled for a few years and was resumed in June 2008 following a presidential order.¹⁷⁶ However, the document highlights again Russia's interests in its 'near abroad' in a similar fashion as the NSC 2000. It emphasizes again NATO's eastward expansion as a major threat for Russia in the international sphere, which is aimed at strategically encircle and contain Russia, leading the latter to consider the membership of its neighboring countries in NATO a red line.¹⁷⁷ While the security-related formulations resemble the NSC 2000 in tone and scope, the NSS to 2020 is overall more self-confident and assertive in tone regarding the challenges Russia is facing; this new-found optimism can be linked to the significant recuperation of the country's relative material power capabilities in comparison to 2000,¹⁷⁸ as Figure 1 on page 36 of this work illustrates, in showing the development of absolute GDP and absolute military spending in US dollars from 1998 to 2008.

Although the NSS to 2020 emphasizes a less hostile attitude towards the US and NATO,¹⁷⁹ in the praxis of international politics the deterioration continued in form of strong disagreements about geopolitical conflicts and their solutions. This is visible in the case of the Russian-Georgian war 2008 and the argument over Libya's Arab Spring revolution 2011, when NATO arguably distorted UNSC resolution 1973 to intervene in the conflict on the side of the rebels against the Gaddafi regime.¹⁸⁰ The resolution was allowing for the establishment of a no-fly-zone over Libya for the purpose of protecting the civilian population, but in Russian perception this was misused and overstepped by NATO to remove Muammar Qaddafi from power.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Giles, *Russia's NSS to 2020*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁷ Dimitrakopoulou and Liaropoulos, pp. 36-37.

¹⁷⁸ Giles, *Russia's NSS to 2020*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷⁹ Javier Morales, 'Russia's New National Security Strategy: Towards a "Medvedev Doctrine"?', in *ARI* 135 (2009), p. 1.

¹⁸⁰ Moritz Pieper, "'Rising Power" Status and the Evolution of International Order: Conceptualising Russia's Syria Policies', in *Europe-Asia Studies* 71.3 (2019), 365-87, p. 372.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

The Libya experience did have a crucial impact on the Russian perception of changing pressures in the IS, in the form of losing a long-time ally in the Islamic World and a lucrative, oil-rich arms buyer.¹⁸² This economically moderate but politically symbolic loss evidently accompanied and influenced Russian decisions in the then unfolding and still lasting Syrian civil war regarding UNSC resolutions.¹⁸³ A direct consequence is to be seen in the Russian resistance against the 2005 UN doctrine ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P) in general and especially against its invocation in the Syrian case. The R2P doctrine was used in Libya 2011 to justify the NATO intervention and was therefore perceived by Russian decision-makers, according to Charap, as “an elaborate cover for regime change.”¹⁸⁴

In order to demonstrate that these perceived pressures from the IS did not only change Russian foreign policy behavior but also drove Russia to adjust its grand strategy, which then manifested in a tougher stance on its interests in the international sphere and a more assertive foreign policy, the FPC 2013 serves as a basis for the following CDA.¹⁸⁵

This document was published in February 2013 and approved by Putin, who returned to the presidential office in May 2012 after his four-year interim as prime minister. It reflects the changes in the pressures emanating from the IS perceived by Russia, in that it cites Russian concerns regarding R2P, warning pointedly that “It is unacceptable that military interventions and other forms of interference [...] be carried out on the pretext of implementing the concept of ‘responsibility to protect’.”¹⁸⁶

This signals clearly the Russian perception of pressures from the IS, and early on in the document it states further “Russia’s increased responsibility for setting the international agenda and shaping the system of international relations”¹⁸⁷, regarding its own position in the IS. This confident tone is grounded in the massively increased relative material power capabilities in comparison to the years predating 2008; the new decade started promising, with some aftermath of the financial crisis 2008 still present. But energy prices

¹⁸² Ekaterina Chirkova, *Key aspects of Russia's current foreign and security policy* (Brussels: European Union, 2012), p. 9.

¹⁸³ Chirkova, pp. 10-12.

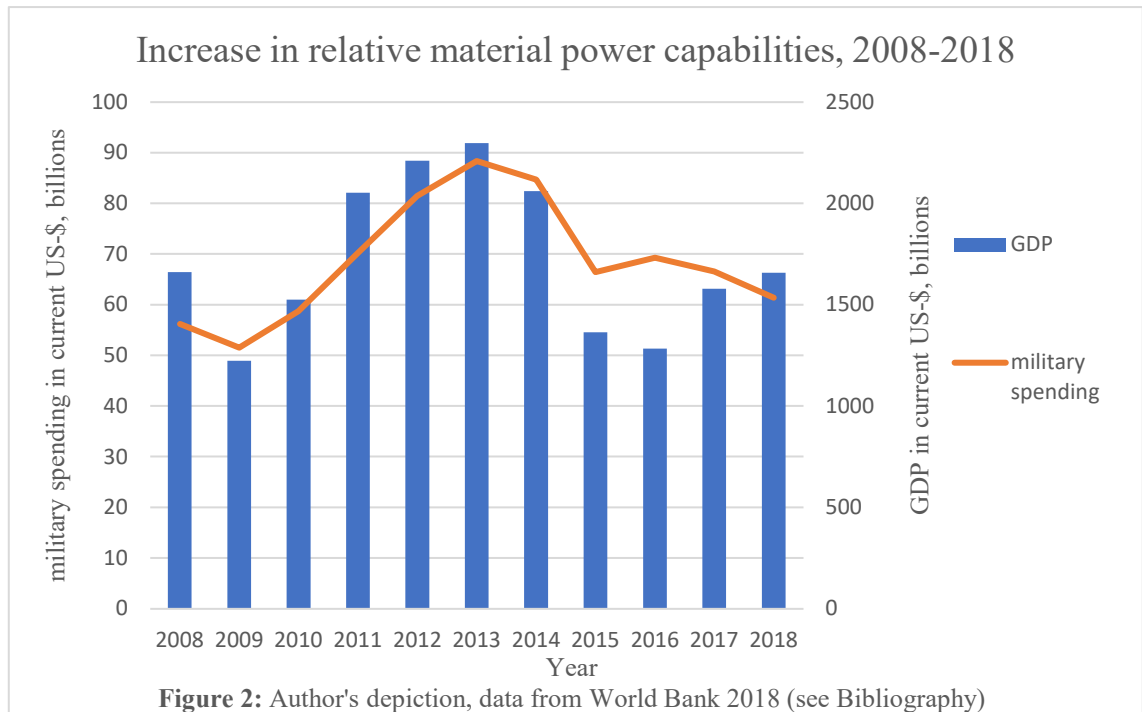
¹⁸⁴ Cited in Pieper, p. 379.

¹⁸⁵ Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) of the Russian Federation 2013.

¹⁸⁶ FPC (2013): Rule of Law in International Relations, §31 b).

¹⁸⁷ FPC (2013): I. General Provisions, §3.

were relatively high again, and as Figure 2 on the next page demonstrates, the GDP and military spending were rising significantly after the crisis years of 2008 and 2009.



Taking a closer look at the military expenditure in 2013, the year prior to the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis and Russia’s intervention, it is apparent that this year represents the peak in Russian military spending in this ten-year period. In comparison to 2008, the year of the Russo-Georgian war, the military expenditure is 1.7 times higher in 2013, which, combined with the GDP standing also at its peak in 2013, indicate a considerable rise in Russian relative material power capabilities in terms of military and economic power.

The updated FPC of November 2016 translated this raised domestic power capabilities into a more assertive discourse, e.g. regarding the R2P doctrine. It specifically expressed that Russia intends “to prevent military interventions or other forms of outside interference contrary to international law, specifically the principle of sovereign equality of States, under the pretext of implementing the ‘responsibility to protect’ concept.”¹⁸⁸

This more confronting discourse in the FPC 2016 compared to the FPC 2013 and other earlier documents must be connected to the wider context of the Ukraine crisis, starting in late 2013 and significantly increasing the pressures from the IS perceived in Russia.

¹⁸⁸ Cited in Pieper, p. 379.

After NATO expanded further with Albania and Croatia in 2009, Russia reportedly feared that this enlargement would not stop at the borders of Ukraine or Georgia.¹⁸⁹ The ongoing developments inside Ukraine around a planned major economic deal with the EU in late 2013, rejected eventually by pro-Russian president Yanukovich in favor of a Russian counteroffer, erupted in protests and led him to flee Ukraine in February 2014.¹⁹⁰

Ukraine is burdened with its geopolitical position between East and West, and has suffered through partition and wars a good part of its history.¹⁹¹ Much of this because of its rich agricultural land lying on the Great European Plain and its beneficial geostrategic position, connecting Europe with Eurasia, on the northern shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.¹⁹² The strategically important access to the Black Sea and thus the Mediterranean might have influenced the Russian decision to seize and annex the Crimea peninsula, with Sevastopol hosting the naval headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet, being strategically most important for the Russian navy and its operations in the Mediterranean.¹⁹³ In Russian perception, Ukraine lies in its zone of interest and serves as a buffer state, the latter perceived as a great power trait, and hence Ukraine is considered to be vital in Russia's protection against invasion and external turmoil.¹⁹⁴

This perception of Ukraine including Crimea is important regarding the grand strategy discourse, especially concerning the protection of Russia's position as an influential great power in the IS and the preservation of Russia's hegemony in the post-Soviet space, the grand strategy objectives. Regarding these, the Ukraine intervention signaled to the world that Russia would not accept the removal of such an important state from its influence zone. The intervention signaled in a sense both objectives to the outward world, first that Russia is indeed a great power which can afford to have a buffer zone around it, and second that it will not be challenged over its position of hegemony in the post-Soviet region.

¹⁸⁹ Mearsheimer, p. 3.

¹⁹⁰ Mearsheimer, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹¹ See Paul R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its People* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 3-8, pp. 110-20.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Liv Karin Parnemo, 'Russia's Naval Development - Grand Ambitions and Tactical Pragmatism', in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32.1 (2019), 41-69, p. 46.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Facon, p. 7.

In that line of thought a comparison can be made to the prelude of the NATO accession of the Baltic states; if undoubtedly with different context, the variables of this thesis' framework can be applied to the case, nevertheless. The perceived pressures from the IS in Russia were similarly high, if not higher in 2004, as evidently signaled in the NSC 2000. The possible presence of NATO troops in the Baltics so close to Moscow and Saint Petersburg constituted a major threat and meant a crucial heightening of structural pressure perceived in Russia.¹⁹⁵ As early as 1996, President Yeltsin warned Washington that a NATO accession of the Baltic states "is absolutely unacceptable. Any steps in that direction would directly challenge Russia's national security interests and undermine European stability and security."¹⁹⁶ There were reportedly even plans to invade the Baltic states in the case they should join NATO, according to documents leaked to the press.¹⁹⁷ The explanation for the non-action of Russia is then to be found in its weak relative material power capabilities in the early 2000s,¹⁹⁸ according to this thesis' neoclassical realist framework. This means that, although driven by the perceived systemic pressures to adjust its grand strategy in means or objectives, Russia could not do so in significant terms because of its lack in domestic power capabilities, and had eventually to give in to the new reality in 2004. Russia did apply some economic pressure on the Baltic states pre-2004 and set back border treaties with Latvia and Estonia, thereby adjusting to the increased systemic pressures, but its foreign policy did not follow through its assertive rhetoric, neither did it fulfill realist expectations in that situation.¹⁹⁹

In the same line of argument, the comparison to the Russo-Georgian war comes to mind. The beforementioned NATO summit in Bucharest, where the alliance considered the accession of Georgia and Ukraine, even amounting to the statement that "These countries will become members of NATO"²⁰⁰, heightened the perceived pressures from the IS in Russia significantly. Yet, in contrast to 2004, Russia's relative material power capabilities were at an unprecedented peak in 2008 and allowed the country therefore to adjust its grand strategy to the perceived systemic pressures. The sequence of events, namely that

¹⁹⁵ Götz, p. 107.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Götz, p. 108.

¹⁹⁸ See Figure 2 on page 47 of this work.

¹⁹⁹ Götz, pp. 108-109.

²⁰⁰ Mearsheimer, p. 3.

the Georgians started the artillery shelling of Tskhinvali, can be interpreted as having delivered the Russians a neat excuse to intervene with considerable force. The quick reaction and advance of the Russian 40th Army was only possible because their station in the proximity of the Georgian border.²⁰¹ The answer to the question if Russia would have intervened, if Georgia had not exerted military force and thus delivered a pretext, and if the rapprochement with NATO had continued, is left open to speculation but certainly worth thinking about. However, the event as it took place delivers sufficient evidence for this thesis' neoclassical realist framework. The systemic pressures pre-August 2008 heightened significantly in Russian perception, and because the relative material power capabilities were high at the time, Russia did adjust its grand strategy towards a more assertive stance vis-à-vis Georgia and the West. In consequence, NATO accession of Georgia was off the table, and the country continues to be affected by the secessionist tendencies of its regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia, those regions thereby enjoying considerable support from Russia.

In the prelude to the Ukraine crisis, the systemic pressures from the IS perceived in Russia were even higher as 2004 and 2008, due to continued NATO and EU eastward expansion.²⁰² Ukraine was not nearly as close to join NATO as the Baltic states were pre-2004, though the EU's further enlargement in 2013 and programs like the Eastern Partnership initiative aimed at economic integration were perceived in Russia as preliminary steps, consequently ending with Ukrainian EU and NATO membership.²⁰³ The month-long protests ending in February 2014 with Yanukovich's flight to Russia and a new pro-Western government in Kiev resembled the earlier color revolutions in Eastern Europe and compelled Russia eventually to intervene, preventing a likely further rapprochement of Ukraine to EU and NATO.²⁰⁴

If the systemic pressures from the IS were perceived as urgent in Russia pre-2004 and in early 2014 as even higher, the explanation for the significant intervention in Ukraine lies then in the massively increased Russian relative material power capabilities. The absolute GDP as well as the military spending were at their absolute peak in 2013, with the former

²⁰¹ Ellison, p. 344.

²⁰² Cf. Mearsheimer, pp. 2-3.

²⁰³ Mearsheimer, pp. 3-4.

²⁰⁴ Parnemo, p. 46.

close to 2,300 billion US dollars and the latter exceeding 88 billion US dollars.²⁰⁵ The intervention is understood in a similar line as the one in Georgia 2008; the specific conflict dynamic was not planned for or included in Russian grand strategy, but the possibility of a neighboring state in Russia's zone of interest aiming to join EU or NATO can certainly be seen as an eventuality which was planned for accordingly. The continuing expansion of both organizations, especially with the Russian experience in 2004, justified this expectation to a certain degree and it remains arguable if Ukraine would not have joined either organization in the meantime, without Russian intervention.

Another indicator of Russia's relative material power capabilities, apart from GDP and military spending, is the state of the Russian armed forces including the aims and results of the military reform process started in 2008. The Russian military did evidently come a long way from its outdated state in the early 2000's, demonstrated in the various means it was able to deploy in the Ukraine conflict. Reaching from Russian Special Forces units which appeared in Crimea wearing no national emblem and took over control of the peninsula, to economic strategies, cyber-attacks, and a media propaganda campaign.²⁰⁶

These new capabilities are a result of the overall successful progress of the reformation and modernization process of the Russian Armed Forces. The process started already in 2008 in the wake of the Russian-Georgian war under then defense secretary Anatoliy Serdyukov and continued under his successor and current secretary of defense, Sergey Shoygu.²⁰⁷

While the reform and modernization processes are continuing, Keir Giles assesses that a variety of challenges remain, "including issues of affordability, manning, organizational development, and the implementation of lessons learned from Ukraine and Syria."²⁰⁸ Significant progress has been reported throughout the past decade by several international observers. The US Defense Intelligence Agency for instance describes the Russian Armed Forces in a 2017 military analysis as a "mobile, balanced force rapidly becoming capable of conducting the full range of modern warfare."²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ See Figure 2 on page 47 of this work.

²⁰⁶ See Michael E. Becker et al., 'Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens', in *European Security* 25.1 (2016), 112–33, pp. 120-26.

²⁰⁷ Giles, *Assessing Russia's Military*, pp. 1-2.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ US DIA, p. 13.

Another report from 2018 attests Russia “a notable increase in the quality of Russian forces over the last decade”²¹⁰, observable in “the fielding of modernized weapons, the improvements to readiness, and the experience gained from large-scale exercises and combat operations in Ukraine and Syria.”²¹¹ These developments indicate an adjustment of Russia’s grand strategy in the military dimension, since capabilities like e.g. out-of-area operations are developed with the aim to increase the military’s ability to assert grand strategy objectives.

As Adrian Karatnycky assessed in 2018, the Ukraine crisis could have served as a guinea pig for Russia “not only as a testing ground for techniques of hybrid war and political disruption, but as a test of the West’s resolve.”²¹² However accurate this interpretation might be, Russia has been observed from early on in the Ukraine conflict to rotate its soldiers regularly at the Ukrainian border, presumably to give them the chance to gather experience under operating conditions.²¹³ The value of veterans with combat experience for an army should not be underestimated, be it for the purpose of training new recruits or for military leader’s capabilities.

The importance of strategic nuclear weapons is continuing in the reform process of the Russian armed forces. Bartles assigns the reasons for that to Russian threat perception of American missile systems and to the perception of an increasingly unstable, multipolar world order:

Although Russia’s perceptions of threat are now changing, causing Russia to shed its mass mobilization army [...] in favor of a smaller, more agile army that is more capable of conducting small regional conflicts, anti-terrorism/anti-separatist operations, and peacekeeping duties, Russia is still making large investments in renewing its strategic nuclear arsenal.²¹⁴

Although the political circumstances surrounding Russia’s engagement in the Syrian civil war differ considerably from the situation in Ukraine, it nevertheless resembled the latter in that it evolved to a proxy war, involving numerous players in a bid for dominance in the Middle East instead of Eastern Europe respectively. It can be fairly assumed that the

²¹⁰ Scott Boston et al., *Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), p. 5.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Cited in D’Anieri, p. 108.

²¹³ Giles, *Assessing Russia’s Military*, p. 2.

²¹⁴ Charles K. Bartles, ‘Russian Threat Perception and the Ballistic Missile Defense System’, in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 30.2 (2017), 152–69, pp. 152-53.

experiences Russia has made in Ukraine did influence decision-makers' perception of the situation and the probable response of the West. In this regard it should have been quite clear to Russian decision-makers that the West and the US under the Obama administration was not very keen to commit substantial military combat forces, neither to the crisis in Ukraine nor to that in Syria.²¹⁵

The events in Ukraine and Syria imply a change in Russian foreign policy behavior towards a more assertive, self-confident posture in comparison to the first decade of Putin's presidency. To evidently demonstrate a Russian grand strategy adjustment due to the perceived pressures from the IS and moderated by Russian relative material power capabilities, it is necessary to look at the official strategic paper of the Russian government within the textual chain of main strategic papers: the NSS of December 2015.²¹⁶ A comparison to the previously published NSS to 2020 from 2009 serves to demonstrate an adjustment in Russian grand strategy. The grand strategy objectives have been adjusted, and they were evidently pursued in a more assertive foreign policy. This has been demonstrated already in Georgia (2008), in Ukraine (2014), and in Syria (2015), with Russia relying increasingly on its military and hard power tools.²¹⁷

The adjustment of the grand strategy objectives was expressed in a modified discourse of Russia as a world power defending its sovereignty and compatriots also abroad. The Syria intervention is evident for this new discourse of a world power projecting power also beyond its own borders. The first expeditionary operation since the Soviet era successfully halted the decline of the Assad regime and established Russia as a major player in the Middle East.²¹⁸

The shift to a more assertive foreign policy praxis is expressed within the continued grand strategy discourse in the NSS 2015. Published in December 2015, it shows a modification of the discourse compared to the previous version and expresses the need of "consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power, whose actions are aimed at maintaining strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnerships in a polycentric world."²¹⁹ The new self-perception of being a leading world power in a

²¹⁵ Cf. Katz, p. 3.

²¹⁶ Russian National Security Strategy (NSS), December 2015.

²¹⁷ Facon, pp. 5-6.

²¹⁸ Cf. US DIA, p. 13.

²¹⁹ NSS (2015): III. National Interests and Strategic National Priorities. §30.

polycentric world modifies the previous discourse of Russia as an independent great power in the IS. It is expressed early on in the document with discourses about Russia having proven its “ability to safeguard sovereignty, independence, and state and territorial integrity and to protect the rights of compatriots abroad.”²²⁰ The NSS then goes on in filling the world power discourse with meaning: “There has been an increase in the Russian Federation's role in resolving the most important international problems, settling military conflicts, and ensuring strategic stability.”²²¹

The formulation of being able to protect compatriots abroad is a clear insinuation to the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, since this discourse was used in both cases to justify the interventions, between others. As Facon interprets it, this also highlights the importance of maintaining “Russia’s pre-eminence and influence in the post-Soviet space [as] a key foreign policy priority.”²²² This underlines the Russian perception of possible strategic encirclement through the West, resulting in the reservation of possible use of force in the country’s zone of interest, to prevent this entrenchment from happening.²²³ This perception is clearly expressed in the NSS 2015 and assigns the blame solely to the US and its allies, “who are seeking to retain their dominance in world affairs. The policy of containing Russia that they are implementing envisions the exertion of political, economic, military, and informational pressure on it.”²²⁴

The threat of a possible EU or NATO membership for Ukraine in 2014 constituted a new peak of systemic pressures perceived in Russia, higher than in 2004 with the NATO accession of the Baltics or 2008 with the Russo-Georgian war. This argument is supported by the assumption that Ukraine becoming a NATO member is certainly perceived a far greater threat in Russia than a similar membership for Georgia or the Baltic states; this regards size of territory, population, military, economy, infrastructure, etc. The perceived pressures from the IS have also found their expression in the NSS 2015, where it explicitly states that “The support of the United States and the European Union for the anti-

²²⁰ NSS (2015): II. Russia in the Modern World. §8.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Facon, p. 7.

²²³ Cf. *ibid.*

²²⁴ NSS (2015): II. Russia in the Modern World. §12.

constitutional coup d'état in Ukraine led to a deep split in Ukrainian society and the emergence of an armed conflict.”²²⁵

The perceived systemic pressures underlying these conflicts drove Russia to adjust its grand strategy, and it could do so only because of its increased relative material power capabilities allowed it to. Following this thesis' neoclassical realist framework, a case in point is the 2004 NATO accession of the Baltic states, which did not lead to an intervention by Russia because it lacked the relative material power capabilities to execute one. The reverse is then true for the Russian interventions in Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014, when the perceived systemic pressures from the IS were also high, as were Russia's relative material power capabilities. This allowed the adjustment of Russia's grand strategy and resulted in a more self-confident and assertive foreign policy, aimed at fulfilling the grand strategy objectives. These objectives were also adjusted between 2008 and 2014, evident in the modified grand strategy discourse in the FPC 2013 and the NSS 2015.

²²⁵ NSS (2015): II. Russia in the Modern World. §17.

Conclusion

The thesis answered the research question of ‘which factors drive Russia’s grand strategy adjustment’ and found that perceived international pressures emanating from the IS do influence this adjustment, moderated by Russia’s relative material power capabilities. Within its neoclassical realist framework, the thesis showed a constant increase of systemic pressures perceived in Russia from 2000 onwards, peaking the first time in 2004 with the NATO accession of the Baltic states, and the second time in 2008 with the impending threat of Georgian NATO membership. These two cases served to verify the thesis’ hypothesis, that *the higher the perceived systemic pressures from the IS, the more Russia will adjust its grand strategy, to the extent its relative material power capabilities allow it to do so*. Since the perceived systemic pressures were in both cases high, but only in 2008 resulted in a Russian grand strategy adjustment, the reason for the different outcome was found in the stark contrast between relative material power capabilities in 2004 and 2008. The grand strategy adjustment in 2008 could thus take place, consisting in the swift and potent military intervention in Georgia, as well as in a modified grand strategy discourse in the NSS to 2020 and following strategic publications.

The perceived systemic pressures continued to heighten, amplified by the NATO intervention in Libya 2011, and reached a new peak around 2014, evident in the events leading to the Ukraine crisis and in its consequences. Russia’s relative material power capabilities did also reach an unprecedented high point in 2013, however, and enabled the country to adjust its grand strategy to those perceived systemic pressures. Russia’s reaction to the events around Ukraine served further to underscore the grand strategy goal of hegemony in the post-Soviet region, which remained constant during the analyzed period.

The altered grand strategy discourse was found to be expressed in the NSS 2015, in form of the modified grand strategy objective: consolidation of Russia's status as a leading world power. The thus modified grand strategy discourse represented an adjustment of Russian grand strategy, due to the systemic pressures from the IS perceived in Russia. This was only made possible through the massively increased domestic power capabilities in 2014 and 2015 in comparison to 2004. This increase, in connection with the reformed

military, enabled Russia also to intervene in Syria 2015 and follow through its modified grand strategy objective of being a leading world power.

The grand strategy adjustment itself was demonstrated through CDA of major strategic publications of the Russian government, namely the NSC 2000, the NSS to 2020, the FPCs 2013 and 2016, and the NSS 2015. These were conceptualized as building an intertextual chain containing the Russian grand strategy discourse, reproducing and modifying the latter.

Those publications were also used to extract Russian perceptions of systemic pressures, under the assumption that decision-making elites signal their interests and red lines therein, and thus their perception of international developments. This signaling of perceived systemic pressures grew continuously more intense from 2000 to 2014, and consequently resulted in adjustments in Russia's grand strategy, dependent on its relative material power capabilities.

The thesis fulfilled the stated objective, to enhance the understanding of Russian foreign policy conduct. It did so by applying the concept of grand strategy to Russia for the past two decades and placed this within a neoclassical realist framework of grand strategy adjustment. This framework worked well in the case of Russia and explained why perceived heightened systemic pressures sometimes lead to an assertive foreign policy and other times not: because of the moderating function of relative material power capabilities.

There is then no reason why this framework could not be applied to other great powers or states. Whereas much work within the research field of grand strategy has been focused on the US in different points of time, much less has been concentrated on China, or other great or emerging powers for that matter. The thesis' framework therefore offers a starting point for more research on grand strategy adjustment, and, thanks to the flexibility of neoclassical realism, can also be extended to include other factors.

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