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Destabilizing Hegemony: Fostering Uncertainty to Sustain Russian Status with Multipolarity

Hegemonyayı Sarsmak: Rusya'nın Küresel Statüsünü Çok Kutupluluk Yoluyla Koruma Arayışı

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ABSTRACT

Since the commencement of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term, Russia has undergone a significant transformation in its foreign policy, becoming more globally active and regionally assertive. This study argues that central to this transformation is the strategic use of "unpredictability" to advance Russia's interests in an international environment where US hegemony is perceived to be declining. The strategy of unpredictability is primarily executed through cyberattacks and coercive military power, aimed at reshaping the international system to favor Russian interests. The research question examined by this paper is: What strategy underlies Russia's use of cyberattacks and coercive military power to challenge US hegemony? To answer the question, our study employs Kenneth Waltz's three levels of analysis in international relations: the individual, the state, and the system levels. At the individual level, we examine how Vladimir Putin's personal beliefs and strategic calculations shape Russian foreign policy. At the state level, we explore how Russia's internal political, economic, and social structures contribute to its foreign policy actions. At the systemic level, we analyze how Russia seeks to challenge the ideological foundations of the US-led international order and create a multipolar world. Russia's cyber operations against Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine, alongside its military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, serve as examples of this strategy. This study evaluates the role of unpredictability in achieving Russia's foreign policy objectives and its implications for the international system. Finally, the consequences of this strategy for global governance are discussed.

ÖZ

Vladimir Putin'in üçüncü başkanlık döneminden itibaren Rusya, dış politikasında belirgin bir dönüşüm sergileyerek küresel ölçekte daha aktif ve bölgesel olarak daha iddialı bir duruş sergilemiştir. Bu çalışmada, bu dönüşümün merkezinde, ABD hegemonyasının azaldığı bir uluslararası ortamda Rusya'nın çıkarlarını ilerletmek amacıyla "öngörülemezlik" stratejisinin kullanıldığı savunulmaktadır. Öngörülemezlik stratejisi, siber saldırılar ve zorlayıcı askeri güç kullanımı aracılığıyla yürütülmektedir ve Rusya'nın uluslararası sistemi kendi çıkarları doğrultusunda yeniden şekillendirmeyi amaçladığını göstermektedir. Araştırma sorumuz şu şekildedir: "Rusya'nın, siber saldırılar ve zorlayıcı askeri güç kullanımında ABD hegemonyasına meydan okuma stratejisi nedir?". Bu bağlamda, çalışmamız Kenneth Waltz'ın uluslararası ilişkilerde üç analiz düzeyine dayanan teorik çerçevesini kullanmaktadır: birey, devlet ve sistem düzeyleri. Birey düzeyinde, Vladimir Putin'in kişisel inançlarının ve stratejik hesaplamalarının dış politikaya etkisi incelenmektedir. Devlet düzeyinde, Rusya'nın iç siyasi, ekonomik ve toplumsal yapılarının dış politikaya katkıları ele alınmaktadır. Sistem düzeyinde ise Rusya'nın ABD liderliğindeki uluslararası düzenin ideolojik temellerine meydan okuması ve çok kutuplu bir dünya düzeni oluşturma çabaları incelenmektedir. Siber saldırılar (Estonya, Gürcistan, Ukrayna) ve zorlayıcı askeri güç kullanımları (Gürcistan, Ukrayna, Suriye), Rusya'nın bu stratejiyi nasıl uyguladığının örnekleridir. Çalışmamız, bu stratejinin Rusya'nın dış politika hedeflerine ulaşma sürecindeki rolünü ve uluslararası sistem üzerindeki etkilerini analiz etmektedir. Son olarak, bu stratejinin küresel yönetim üzerindeki sonuçları tartışılmaktadır.

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Introduction

Since the commencement of Vladimir Putin's third term as president, Russia has exhibited a marked transformation in its foreign policy, characterized by increased global activism and regional assertiveness (Hill and Gaddy, 2012; Kanet, 2019). We argue that central to this transformation is the strategic use of 'unpredictability' as a tool to advance Russia's interests in an international environment where the United States's (U.S.) hegemony is perceived to be declining. The unpredictability is primarily executed through cyberattacks and coercive military power, aimed at destabilizing perceived adversaries and reshaping the international system to favor Russian interests.

This can be observed through a comprehensive analysis of Russia's foreign policy, focusing on Russia's tactical actions to achieve its strategic goal. It is argued here that Russia's goal is to strengthen its global influence by fostering an unpredictable international climate, thereby expediting the decline of U.S. hegemonic power and elevating Russia's global status. This strategy employs a combination of military and cyber capabilities to challenge the existing global status of the United States and its allies. Our contribution to the literature lies in bridging the gap in understanding the comprehensive strategy underpinning Russia's actions. While the existing literature has extensively covered Russia's military engagements and political interventions, there is a need for an explanation of the broader framework of Russia's foreign policy strategy and its implications for the international system.

The theoretical approach to this analysis draws on Kenneth Waltz's three levels of analysis in international relations. Waltz's (2001) theory provides a good lens to understand the complex dynamics of international politics and actors like Russia. At the individual level, we consider the influence of key leaders, such as Vladimir Putin, whose personal beliefs, experiences, and strategic calculations significantly shape Russia's foreign policy decisions. At the state level, we examine the internal political, economic, and social structures of Russia that drive its foreign policy actions. However, this analysis places a particular emphasis on the systemic level, which focuses on the broader international environment and the interactions among states within the international system. Emphasizing the systemic level, we explore how Russia's actions are aimed at achieving broader objectives rather than merely influencing specific theaters and outcomes. The starting point of the analysis is the assertion that Russia's foreign policy strategy under Putin has been characterized by a deliberate effort to foster unpredictability in the international system. This strategy is rooted in a desire to counterbalance the U.S.-led Western hegemony and create a multipolar world where Russian influence is strengthened. Although we share the Waltzian framework, one of our contributions is to show how unorthodox ideational factors can also play an important role in the conduct of foreign policy in a strategic way. By challenging the ideational foundations of the U.S.-led international order, Russia seeks to create systemic repercussions that weaken the existing hegemony.

Cyberattacks and coercive military power are the two primary mechanisms through which Russia operationalizes this strategy. Notable examples of cyberattacks include Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008, and Ukraine in 2014. These cyber operations target critical infrastructure, disrupt communications, and sow confusion, thereby weakening adversaries and enhancing Russia's strategic position. In parallel, Russia's use of coercive military power is evident in its interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014 and 2022), and Syria (2015 and 2024). These military actions involve direct engagements, support for government or separatist movements, and the deployment of sophisticated military tactics in various theatres, aimed at countering U.S. domination and control. Collectively, these actions achieve immediate tactical objectives while also creating long-term strategic uncertainties for Russia's adversaries, making it challenging for them to anticipate and effectively counter Russian moves.

The declining U.S. hegemony creates a favorable environment for Russia's strategy of unpredictability. As the U.S. grapples with internal challenges such as political polarization, economic inequalities, and social unrest, its capacity to project power and maintain global stability is perceived to be diminishing. Externally, criticisms of unjust U.S. foreign policies and interventions further erode its influence. Russia exploits these conditions by using unpredictability to take advantage of gaps in U.S. influence. Through its cyber and military tactics, Russia challenges U.S.-led initiatives, disrupts alliances, and creates alternative power structures that favor Russian interests. By doing so, Russia not only asserts its strategic objectives but also undermines the existing rule-based international order created to maintain peace and security (but not justice, Mazrui 1990), and in that way facilitating the emergence of a more multipolar world.

In the following sections, we will explore the evolution of Russia's strategy of systemic unpredictability, examining pivotal moments that has shaped its current stance. We will analyze case studies such as the conflict in Ukraine and the Syrian Civil War, specifically illustrating how Russia employs unpredictability to achieve its foreign policy objectives. We will also explore the role of the state's soft power and cyber capabilities in Russia's strategy, highlighting how these tools have been repurposed to reinforce state control and counter Western influence. Finally, we will discuss the implications of Russia's strategy for the international system and the future direction of global governance.

Predictability and Unpredictability

When the discourses guiding Russia's foreign policy in the post-1990 period are examined, it could be seen that Russia was experiencing a transformation and almost all political movements emphasize the need for restructuring in order to be part of the new international system after the Cold War. At this point, two general views appear to come to the fore within Russia. These are the Atlanticists, who advocate for Westernism in foreign policy, and the Eurasianists, who are anti-Westernism. Although the policy of Atlanticism, which preferred Westernism, was followed after the dissolution of the USSR during the reign of Boris Yeltsin, after a while, the policy of Eurasianism became dominant under the influence of Vladimir Putin, who was brought to power by the Russian deep state infrastructure (Şöhret, 2015b, pp. 585-586)

Ever since then Russia's foreign policy under Vladimir Putin has increasingly utilized unpredictability as a strategic tool. This approach marks a significant shift from just traditional diplomatic norms, aiming to disrupt the U.S.-led international order and promote a multipolar world where Russian influence is more pronounced, and its global power status is recognized and solidified. At the systemic level, unpredictability challenges the predictability inherent in the current global order, primarily dominated by the United States. The U.S. hegemony relies on a stable, predictable international environment, supported by its own economic, military, and ideational pillars. By fostering unpredictability, Russia seeks to weaken these foundations and create a more fragmented and unstable international system. At the state level, Russia's internal dynamics, including centralized authority and emphasis on sovereignty, facilitate the use of unpredictability in its foreign policy. The state's consolidation of power under Putin, coupled with economic resilience and societal attitudes, supports a foreign policy that leverages unpredictability to protect and advance national interests (Goldman, 2010, p. 178). Such orientation could only be effectively sustained at the individual level by a strong leader. Being such a leader, Vladimir Putin's tactical calculations and experiences significantly shape the use of unpredictability. His background in intelligence and security services informs a worldview that values unpredictability to keep adversaries off-balance and exploit opportunities in a fluid international environment (Short, 2023, p. 145). Therefore, Putin's leadership style and decision-making processes are crucial in implementing this strategy.

Sources of Predictability in the International System

As Kentor posits, hegemony is a tangible phenomenon, articulated through the symbiosis of economic prowess (manifested in mechanisms such as sanctions or access to pivotal international financial institutions like the WTO and IMF) and coercive might (embodied in state military capabilities) (Kentor, 2005, pp. 74-87). Both are important for this observation because actors use them either interchangeably or combined, as in the case of the U.S, which ensures its hegemonic dominance with its capital-coercive intensive structure. Following George H. Bush's 1991 proclamation of a "new world order" to both the U.S. Congress and the global audience, American strategists heralded the dawn of a "New American Century," anticipating the enduring supremacy of U.S. dominance into the 21st century. However, such proclamations and anticipations have not mitigated much the anarchic disposition of the international system, which remains devoid of a supervisory entity that other states might rely on for protection, as starkly demonstrated by the recent Gaza crisis. Yet, the proclamation signaled the desire of the U.S. to be a single global hegemon that can assert its will on players in the international arena and insist on U.S.-preferred outcomes, and in that way influence interactions among players within the international system.

With this shift from one of the Cold War superpowers to a single hegemonic power, and precisely because there is no agency above the state, the U.S. gained the ability to increase and enforce its will upon individual actors. In this way, the U.S. increased predictability in the international system, in terms of which actions and outcomes will occur in the international sphere, in accordance with the U.S.'s desires and demands. Therefore, predictability refers not to stability or absence of conflict, but rather, to a new logic in the international system where the hegemon's preferred course of action and outcomes are more likely. This scenario should be observed by looking at military and economic, as well as ideational factors. The current international system is predominantly liberal and democratic, among many other things, and as such it hurts authoritarian states, like Russia. For this reason, Russia is also engaged in an ideational confrontation against the West.

Domestic sources supporting international hegemony are also relevant as a point of observation. Concurring with the notion that U.S. hegemony is underpinned by a rich ideological and societal orientation, we could reference Bacevich's (2005) observation that a significant segment of American society, particularly Christian Evangelicals, perceive the U.S. military as an essential extension of Jesus Christ's saving mission (p 146). This perception garners widespread support among the populace, facilitating the allocation of increased funds for military endeavors, while the prowess of the U.S. military is viewed as a tool to address various global challenges and irregularities in accordance to U.S. ideas (Bacevich, 2005, p. 57). Related to this, Bacevich points out the support for the U.S.'s global role by neoconservatives who argue that the U.S. military is a benign hegemon, essentially agreeing with Bacevich on the role of the U.S. military in its foreign policy but disagreeing about the foundations of U.S. military expansion. Similarly, Ikenberry (2011) presents a counterargument, positing that U.S. hegemony extends beyond mere coercive force, outlining how the U.S., in concert with other Western powers, has fostered a liberal international order grounded in openness, rule-based governance, and progressive ideals (p. 2). He contends that the U.S. commitment to the existing rule-based liberal framework engenders mutual benefits across global economic, political, and security domains. Ikenberry (2011) further asserts that the U.S. distinguishes itself from historical empires through its reliance on consensual norms and international institutions, with the U.S. military's capabilities ensuring adherence and engagement from the global community (p. 25). Regarding the role of the U.S. military, in the same work he argues that the power capabilities available to the hegemon ensure the compliance and participation of other members of the international system (p. 57).

There is an ongoing discussion among the observers about whether the U.S.'s hegemony is at a zenith, in decline, or on the rise. What all of them have in common is that U.S.'s hegemony is still out there, and we suggest that we pay attention to how unpredictability as a counterbalance of hegemony affects international politics. Accordingly, we argue that if the hegemony is at its peak, unpredictability saps it; if it is in decline, it will further exacerbate the decline; and if the hegemony is on the rise, increased unpredictability in the international relations system will certainly slow the rise, or possibly even completely stop it.

However, constructing a unipolar world based on unpredictability-predictability has drawbacks as well. The demise of the USSR brought about a unipolar system where the unchecked U.S. empire overextended its reach to the border of Russia via NATO and by other means, a condition well-explained by Paul Kennedy (1988). As suggested by him, overextension has been one of the reasons for the ultimate collapse of empires throughout history and the U.S. has reached the point where it runs the risk of falling into this trap (p. 515). Additionally, Julian Go (2011) assumes that empires go through the following phases: hegemonic ascendancy when states develop their economic and military capacities to the point of superiority vis-à-vis their rivals; hegemonic maturity when empires achieve global military and economic superiority; and hegemonic decline when they begin to be challenged by their rivals. Go (2011) examines time phases that correspond to British and American respective imperial stages and comparatively analyzes their patterns as useful circumstances to make predictions. Kennedy and Go suggest that the U.S.-led predictability in the international system can be challenged at the very phase when hegemony seems to be at its zenith. Those approaches to imperial strength rely on economic and military calculations, and we can add the ideational component suggested by Ibn Khaldun when he notes a group's strength and quality of *assabiya* -roughly translated as a national identity with common internal group cohesion and goals- as the most important factor for perpetuating an empire and its dominance. When the strength and quality of an empire's assay weakens, the empire is in decline (Go, 2011, p. 1). Russia, with its strategy of unpredictability, seems to be trying to undermine the U.S.'s hegemony in all those dimensions.

Why Does Russia Seek Unpredictability?

Unpredictability in the international system creates a wider area for Russian maneuvering and helps it amass power and influence. The desired international unpredictability operates with a simple logic. Since units within the international relations system are interacting, a change or disruption anywhere in the system causes fluctuations in the rest of the system as well. Therefore, if Russia facilitates and encourages enough of these changes or disruptions in the system, the hegemon who sits on top of it will certainly weaken and preferably fall off the top. If the hegemon remains on top, the structure that it created will become less stable, and subsequently, its hegemonic ability to project power will diminish. Therefore, in either situation, Russia hopes to gain maneuvering space in the international system to (re)assert itself. Because unpredictability is dangerous, like a Damoclean sword hanging over politicians and generals, it keeps various adversaries in a constant state of uncertainty that self-generates more unpredictability.

Since the U.S.'s hegemony is based on a combination of internal stability, economic, coercive, and ideational power, and because states try to use whatever type of power they have to improve their status, Russia is using multiple tools to achieve its goals. In places where Russia uses coercive military power, such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, and to a lesser extent, Serbia and Bosnia in the Balkans, along with the Sahel region in Africa, a high level of unpredictability produces a large maneuvering space for Russia to interject itself into interactions among those states and even to extend its influence into neighboring countries in various ways. For example, since the global economy is very much dependent on expectations,

unpredictability can destabilize economic structures and hegemony by undermining Saudi Arabian oil production, or disrupting global grain supply chains, as both were done in 2023 with Russia in background.

Russia's push for unpredictability in the ideational foundations of the international system is evident in its official documents as well as its actions. In an essay published in 2013 in a Russian military journal, Russia's Chief of Staff Valeriy Gerasimov suggested that the regime collapse in the Middle East and North Africa happened as a result of information warfare (Fridman, 2019). As can be understood from his words, Russia sees information as a sphere or platform that can be operationalized to disorganize governance, shape an enemy's public opinion, and organize protests against the incumbent government (Galeotti, 2014).

On December 5, 2016, the Russian Federation's Defense Ministry issued the "Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation". This pivotal document articulates the information domain as an expansive ecosystem, encompassing digital data, the Internet, content creators, and the regulatory frameworks that govern interactions within this space. Central to the doctrine is the assertion that safeguarding Russia's information infrastructure, catalyzing the growth of its information technology sector, and enhancing national information security interests are of paramount importance. The doctrine critically addresses the exploitation of the information realm by state and non-state entities for militaristic endeavors, particularly through the undermining of political and social stability across various global regions (Putin, 2016). A cornerstone of the document is the strategic imperative for Russia's security services to mitigate information-related threats, emphasizing the augmentation of Russia's technological sophistication. This mandates a concerted effort to cultivate Russia's capacities in soft power and cyber power, preparing the groundwork for a nuanced development and deployment of such orientation. Importantly, the doctrine posits that the pursuit of ambiguity and the cultivation of strategic unpredictability might, in itself, constitute a form of victory, underscoring the nuanced approach Russia adopts with the use of information security toward achieving its geopolitical objectives.

Evolution of the Russian Strategy of Unpredictability

Seeking to increase unpredictability in the international system is a journey marked by ideational shifts, strategic recalibrations, and a response to changing global realities. This subsection aims to trace the contours of this journey, examining the pivotal moments that shaped Russia's path from the euphoric pro-Western aftermath of the Cold War to its assertive, and sometimes confrontational stance under Vladimir Putin. In that way, we gain crucial insights into the motivations and strategies that underpin Russia's current position on the world stage, offering a nuanced understanding of its role in the evolving international order, with aims to increase the level of unpredictability in the international system. The adoption of this strategy came as a result of the process of learning that took place throughout the three post-Cold War decades while the new Russian state searched for its "place under the sun" and a way into the international system. The current Russian Federation was born as a state that was ostensibly looking to be part of the liberal world order. However, over time this enthusiasm was replaced by disappointment and the desire to assert the unique Russian way of thinking in politics and international relations. In this part, we should examine how this learning process took place and pushed Russia towards adopting such a strategic orientation.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union created euphoria in the liberal West as well as among the Western-friendly wing within the new Russia. Yeltsin's construct of a national interest came after his defeat of Gorbachev. Consequently, Russia's national interest was also to be aligned with the West (Felkay, 2002, p. 194). The Yeltsin-Kozyrev duo aimed for radical economic reform, membership in international Western institutions, and separation from the

former Soviet states. The above-mentioned goal was embodied in the document issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1992 as the Concept of the National Interest of the Russian Federation. Westernizers attempted to erect economic (quitting the ruble zone, ending the customs union), strategic (ignoring Russians outside of Russia and clashes in the former USSR), and cultural (construction of a new “best identity” Tolz, 1998) barriers between Russia and the former Soviet Republics, contrary to the Commonwealth of Independent States agreement. In the end, Kozyrev attempted to push Gorbachev’s reforms even further, but their efforts were precluded by the West’s unwillingness and inability to respond with the support of the new path, as well as the strong push back response from what remained of the Soviet bureaucracy. The dissolution of the USSR paraded as a defeat, the West’s unwillingness to accept Russia and give it substantive aid, the economic and social crisis, and separatist movements gradually paved the way for rather statist ideas to prevail within the new Russia.

This trend was further strengthened under Primakov’s Foreign Ministry, which argued that as a weaker superpower, Russia had to find a new way to balance against the US and prioritize its internal development, an idea he borrowed from Gorchakov. Primakov wanted cooperation with the West, but not full submission; he also wanted integration with the former Soviet states, but did not condone previous imperial overstretch. These ideas found a place in their 1997 National Security Concept as well. Although Primakov was critical of NATO’s aggressive expansion, he attempted to adapt Russia to the new reality. Following the 1999 U.S. intervention in Kosovo, Russia re-realized that the real threat to Russia was still NATO and that Russia’s relations with the former Soviet countries should be strengthened, while China was not much of a threat – rather, it began to be seen as a possible partner, like in the Balkans (Imširović et al. 2024). This strategy was a major departure from the isolationist tone adopted during the early 1990s (Halbach 2022, p. 16). Now, Russia assumed a more active role in regional issues, which was welcomed by many, both inside and outside of the state. Under Primakov, Russia re-claimed influence in the post-Soviet space and aimed to balance the West globally.

The failure of the above-mentioned initially desired reforms and Yeltsin’s ailing health, paved the way for Putin’s presidency and made his goals explicitly aimed at the restoration of state authority, adopting the principles of ‘dictatorship of law’ with the ‘power vertical’, all while signaling for a change of course (Putin, 2000). To achieve that, as new President, Putin initially built a coalition of commercial elites and hardliners and prioritized Russia’s economic development. Regarding relations with the West, Putin insisted on Russia’s economic and social well-being and aimed at pragmatic cooperation with the West against international terrorism. What Putin was trying to do was to achieve Russia’s new status not by balancing, but by asserting his state’s interests, all while strengthening the country domestically. In terms of welfare and status, at that point Russia fared well. But this success still could be attributed primarily to rising oil prices, which was Russia’s main export.

Putin’s rhetoric towards the West began to change after the 2004 Beslan attacks when he suspected Western meddling in Russian domestic affairs and began to be more confrontational. He also took steps towards the adjustment of the regime and vertical centralization of power. It came due to Russian anxiety about the U.S.’s desired regime changes in the post-Soviet countries through the Color revolutions, which represented the exercise of the hegemon’s certainty. In response, Russians took precautions by restricting the access of the West inside Russia’s social media spaces. This was also the phase when Russia’s strategy of unpredictability solidified as, at best, a pragmatic option. This transformation had implications for Russia’s foreign policy as well. Putin declared that he considered the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the ‘greatest geopolitical catastrophe’ of the past century (Putin, 2005). In the

following years, the Kremlin repeatedly addressed domestic and international issues more assertively, and by more frequently using military force.

The journey of Russia's foreign policy from the early 1990s to the present day illustrates a nation's struggle to find its place in a changing world. The shift from a pro-Western approach under Yeltsin to a more assertive, often confrontational stance vis-à-vis the West under Putin reflects deep-seated concerns and a response to internal challenges and external perceptions. This evolution, fueled by economic crises, ideological shifts, and geopolitical realities, has seen Russia adopt a strategy aimed at increasing unpredictability in the international system. This strategy, while serving Russia's short-term interests, raises questions about long-term global stability and Russia's role in it. As Russia continues to navigate its path, balancing its historical legacy with contemporary ambitions, its foreign policy remains a critical factor in shaping the international system of the 21st century with increasing multipolarity, as evidence of the relative success of Russia's strategy. Understanding this complex journey not only provides insights into Russia's current policies but also offers valuable lessons for international relations in an era marked by shifting power dynamics and emerging global challenges.

Russian Cyber and Coercive/Military Actions Aiming to Increase Unpredictability

In order to be effective, Russia's strategy of unpredictability is grounded in a comprehensive approach that spans various domains, including military, economic, and ideational tactics supported through the sophisticated information warfare. By leveraging a combination of those actions, Russia aims to weaken its adversaries and expand its influence. This multifaceted strategy is designed to disrupt at every opportunity the established international order, create change often with instability, and challenge the predictability that major powers, particularly the United States, count on. The successful practical application of these tactics demonstrates Russia's ability to adapt and respond to global dynamics, exploiting vulnerabilities and creating opportunities for own maneuvering. The following section will explore some of those specific interventions employed by Russia to achieve its strategic goals, highlighting how these activities are operationalized and their broader implications for international relations. By understanding these tactical actions, we gain deeper insights into Russia's foreign policy and its impact on the evolving geopolitical landscape.

Coercive/Military Actions

Russia's use of coercive military power is a fundamental component of its strategy to destabilize regions and amplify its geopolitical influence. This approach entails direct military interventions and the calculated use of force to achieve specific strategic objectives. By executing military operations that disrupt the predictability of the outcomes in the international sphere, Russia not only asserts its interests but also generates significant strategic uncertainty for its adversaries forcing them to continuously second-guess themselves as well as other actors involved. This method, again, underscores Russia's readiness and capability to use military force as a means to challenge and reshape existing global power dynamics, making it a pivotal tactic in its broader foreign policy strategy.

We can briefly observe several key instances where Russia has employed coercive military power to further its strategic goals in this fashion. We begin with the 2008 conflict with Georgia, which marked an early demonstration of Russia's willingness to use force to reassert its geo-security interests in the Caucasus and maintain its influence in the post-Soviet space. We then move on to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent conflict in Eastern Ukraine, highlighting how these actions have created ongoing instability and geopolitical tensions. The discussion will also cover Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war, which has significantly bolstered its presence in the Middle East. Finally, we mention Russia's expanding military activities in Africa, where it utilizes private military contractors and military advisors

to extend its reach and secure valuable resources. Through these case studies, we aim to illustrate the scope and impact of Russia's coercive military tactics in its quest to enhance its global influence.

One of the earliest examples of Russia's use of coercive military power was the 2008 war with Georgia when Russia militarily secured both sides of the Caucasian passage through the Roki Tunnel. Russia's rapid and decisive military came as a response to Georgia's attempt to regain control over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, which effectively disrupted the then pro-Western Georgian government's plans and signaled to the international community that Russia was prepared to use force to protect its interests in the post-Soviet space. The conflict began when Georgian forces launched an offensive to reclaim control of the breakaway territory, prompting a quick and massive Russian military response. Within days, Russian forces had not only repelled the Georgian advance but also pushed deep into Georgian territory, highlighting the inadequacies of Georgia's military capabilities and exposing the limitations of U.S.-Western support (Markoff, 2008) and uncertainty of outcomes. As a result, Russia strengthened control of the strategic passage through the Greater Caucasus Mountains and solidified control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both of which declared independence. This intervention not only secured Russian influence in these regions but also served as a warning to other former Soviet states about the potential consequences of pursuing policies contrary to Russian interests, particularly towards the West. It demonstrated Russia's readiness to use military force to maintain its sphere of influence and challenged the Western intention and narrative of an expanding liberal order in Eastern Europe (Asmus, 2014, p. 37).

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 represents another significant example with the use of military power by Russia for its strategic objectives. Following the Euromaidan protests and the ousting of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, Russia swiftly moved to annex Crimea, citing the anti-Russian atmosphere of the protests and need to protect the Russian-speaking populations as a justification. Russia's military intervention in Crimea was executed with a high degree of sophistication and planning, utilizing unmarked troops, known as "little green men," to seize key installations and infrastructure, which shows they were readying themselves for a while to act in such a way. To solidify the takeover, the annexation was followed by a mock referendum, widely criticized and deemed illegitimate by the international community, in which the majority of Crimean voters purportedly chose to join Russia. After the referendum of March 16, 2014, the newly formed Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the special status cities of Sevastopol separated from Ukraine. The mentioned regions were then connected to the Russian Federation under the name of the Republic of Crimea and the federal cities of Sevastopol. After that, Crimea's status ceased to be an internal issue of Ukraine and turned into a regional and global problem. The Crimean Problem has become important enough to be addressed not only in terms of political developments and international relations but also in terms of international law. The annexation of Ukraine's Crimea by the Russian Federation without any valid reason means a violation of international law and the territorial integrity of an independent UN member state. In addition, it causes great debates on the principles of the right to self-determination put forward specifically in Crimea and the transfer of administrative rights over a region from one state to another (Şöhret, 2017, p.3-4). This move was met with significant international condemnation and led to the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia by the U.S. and the European Union (Kuzio, 2017, p. 57), and the US attempts to bolster Ukrainian defenses for a future conflict with Russia (Blinken, 2025).

Russia did not stop meddling with Ukrainian sovereignty only in Crimea. In Eastern Ukraine, Russia has supported separatist movements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, providing them with military, financial, and logistical support in their secessionist efforts. The resulting conflict has further destabilized Ukraine, preventing it from moving closer to the EU

and NATO, and has created a frozen conflict that Russia can manipulate to its advantage, as they did. As the world was reeling from the effects of the global pandemic in 2022, Russia escalated its military actions in Ukraine with a full-scale invasion, marking a significant intensification of the conflict. The invasion using widespread military assaults across multiple fronts, was initially aimed to overthrow the Ukrainian government and install a pro-Russian regime. Despite early gains, Russian forces faced a robust resistance from the U.S.-supported Ukrainian troops and widespread condemnation from the international community. Nevertheless, the invasion led to a big humanitarian crisis, with millions of Ukrainians displaced, and intensified global economic sanctions against Russia but only with mixed results (Benjamin et al., 2023, p. 156). This aggressive 2022 move further demonstrated Russia's willingness to openly use military force to achieve its strategic objectives and significantly increased geopolitical tensions, pushing the world into a phase of unpredictability and uncertainty.

In Syria, Russia's military intervention beginning in 2015 further exemplifies its use of coercive power to achieve strategic goals. By intervening in support of the Assad regime at that time, Russia not only preserved its ally but also established itself as a key power broker in the Middle East and the wider Mediterranean basin. The deployment of air and naval forces, coupled with sophisticated military tactics, allowed Russia to turn the tide of the Syrian civil war in favor of Assad after its troop's initial poor performance facing the widespread Western-backed opposition and actors. Russian airstrikes targeted various rebel groups opposing Assad, weakening their positions and enabling Syrian government forces to reclaim control over significant territory (Geukjian, 2022, p. 215). This intervention served multiple purposes: it protected Russian military bases in Syria, countered Western influence in the region, secured Russian presence on both sides of Bosphorus, and demonstrated Russia's capability to project power beyond its immediate neighborhood. By showcasing its advanced military technology and operational capabilities, Russia also sent a message to other states in the region and beyond about its resurgent military power. Russian assertiveness secured its interests in Syria even after the recent Assad regime collapsed (by and large due to the Russian intervention of removing Assad) and Turkish-backed rebel forces took over the country, but with guarantees that Russian interests would be protected (Osborn and Rodionov, 2024). Thus, the intervention in Syria has had profound implications for regional geopolitics, increasing uncertainty while reinforcing Russia's role as a crucial player in Middle Eastern affairs and ensuring its continued presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Russia's activities in Africa reflect its broader strategy of using military power to expand its influence in strategically significant regions far abroad. Through a combination of military advisors, private military contractors, and arms deals, Russia has deepened its involvement in several African countries sometimes overtly supporting rebel groups, while on the other occasions propping up friendly governments. This approach enables Russia to extend its geopolitical reach while avoiding the direct deployment of its regular military forces. In the Central African Republic, Russia has provided military advisors and equipment to support the government against rebel groups. Russian private military contractors, often linked to the Wagner Group, have played a crucial role in training local forces and securing key areas. This military assistance has been accompanied by agreements granting Russian companies access to valuable natural resources, such as diamonds and gold, highlighting the dual economic and strategic motivations behind Russia's involvement (Banchereau and Donati, 2024). In Libya, Russia supported the rebellious General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army in its bid to control the country. Russian military contractors, advanced weaponry, and political backing bolstered Haftar's forces, significantly influencing the ongoing conflict. Russia's involvement in Libya aims to secure a military foothold in North Africa and establish another base in the

Mediterranean, and in that way gain leverage over Europe by influencing migration flows and regional stability (Wang, 2023, p. 182). Russia's military engagement in Africa extends to other countries as well, including Burkina Faso, Niger, Sudan, and Mozambique, where it has pursued military cooperation agreements and provided security assistance. These activities underscore Russia's intention to reestablish itself as a global power with influence across multiple continents and disrupt global and regional power arrangements.

As evident, by employing coercive military power Russia creates significant unpredictability in the international system making its role is crucial to a resolution of tensions and flash points. These actions achieve immediate geopolitical objectives, and again, also send a clear message to other states about Russia's ability and willingness to protect its geopolitical interests. This approach disrupts the predictability and stability that many states, particularly in the West, rely on thereby enhancing Russia's strategic importance on the global stage.

Discussions about power in international relations are generally expressed as the capacity of a county to control someone and do something for its own benefit. In this respect, in both cases, it is possible to evaluate power as a control mechanism over others and their behavior, as well as one's own agency to act independently. On the other hand, deterrent coercion is defined as taking precautions to prevent and thwart aggression. In practical terms, it means that the opponent or enemy reaches a conclusion on his own in the light of available information. In other words, a state would ask itself "what happens to me if I attack someone?". This question can be made substantially harder to answer due to the increased uncertainty and is an essential part of the Russian deterrent. Although Russia can rely on its nuclear capabilities, deterrence is not a phenomenon that can only be achieved through hard power. A cost to actors could be inflicted through reputation, economy, or ability to form alliances, and all of them depend on information. To ensure and rely on deterrence, the opponent's available opportunities and capabilities should be well known and be evaluated with great care in a rational way. In this context, the impact of possible alliances and collaborations on the deterrence desired to be achieved, should be considered extremely carefully (Şöhret, 2015a, p.75). Russia is evidently doing such evaluations in its attempt to structure its own activities, improve own power and reputation, and minimize impact of the possible deterrence activities by the U.S.-Western block.

Cyber Operations

As we observed, Russia's approach to international relations over time has transformed through the adoption of soft power and cyber capabilities as well. This transformation responds to the perceived threats of the Color Revolutions and the challenge of maintaining own state sovereignty in a highly connected world. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has reorganized own soft power to reinforce state control and counter Western influence, projecting it as a modern version of Soviet-era propaganda. Along that approach, Russia has embraced cyberspace as a critical extension of traditional battlegrounds, focusing on information warfare. Russia's holistic approach to its power projections which includes cyberspace, termed informatization, aims to prevent internal instability and counter external threats, while also to assert own interests abroad. We can note how Russia has implemented such approach and tactics through a few significant events. We will examine early cyberattacks in Estonia, the coordinated cyber and military operations in Georgia and Ukraine, and the intrusion in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. These case studies will illustrate Russia's multifaceted approach to statecraft and its impact on the international landscape.

The Color Revolutions in the early 2000s, which saw a series of pro-democracy uprisings in post-Soviet states, were perceived by Russia as Western attempts to undermine those states' sovereignty and promote desirable regime changes in them. These movements, often supported by Western governments and NGOs, were viewed as direct threats to Russia's

sphere of influence and internal stability (Wilson, 2015, p. 291). In response, President Vladimir Putin highlighted the security concerns posed by foreign soft powers in his presidential addresses. He emphasized that the activities of so-called “pseudo-NGOs” were employed as soft power tools of Western countries to create instabilities within sovereign states (*Article by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for Moskovskiye Novosti*). This perspective was the foundation for Russia's countermeasures. In response to these perceived threats, Russia created its version of soft power, transforming it into a modern incarnation of Soviet-era propaganda. Russia's redefined soft power was designed not just to promote own cultural and political values abroad, but also to counteract Western influence and safeguard state sovereignty. By leveraging media, educational programs, and cultural exchanges, Russia aimed to control its national narrative and reinforce and project its power. This approach builds upon Soviet-era propaganda techniques, which sought to control the information environment and promote a favorable image of the communist state. Russia's modern soft power deployment thus serves as a tool to bolster internal and external state's political regime interests and support overall strategic objectives.

Russia's approach to cyberspace reflects a significant conceptual shift, encapsulated in the term “informatization” (Wentz, et al. 2009). Unlike the Western countries' view that treats cyberspace as a distinct domain, Russia integrates it into its traditional military and geopolitical strategies (Connell and Vogler, 2017). Russian holistic approach sees cyberspace as intertwined with other forms of statecraft, enabling the state to leverage digital technologies for both defensive and offensive purposes. Informatization encompasses not just cyber defense, but also the strategic use of information to influence public opinion anywhere and undermine adversaries with it. For Russia therefore, cyberspace is not a separate realm but an extension of a real battleground. This perspective drives its emphasis on dominating the information sphere to be able to use it as needed. Russian cyber operations aim to tactically disrupt and control the information flow within and beyond its borders, often to create uncertainty and thus maintaining a strategic advantage. The objective of such tactics is to defend against cyber threats and to use cyber capabilities proactively as a part of broader geopolitical maneuvers. Through sophisticated cyber tactics, Russia seeks to undermine the stability of its adversaries, influence political outcomes, and assert its dominance in the information realm.

In April 2007, Estonia became the target of a series of coordinated cyberattacks, marking one of the first major instances of state-sponsored cyber warfare. The attacks began during a period of heightened political tension over the relocation of a Soviet-era World War II memorial known as the Bronze Soldier from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery (Rfe/rl, 2009). This decision sparked outrage among Estonia's Russian-speaking minority and drew sharp criticism from Russia. The cyberattacks, which primarily took the form of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, targeted government websites, banks, and media outlets. These DDoS attacks flooded servers with traffic, overwhelming them and causing significant disruptions to services. Key government websites, including those of the parliament, ministries, and the prime minister's office, were rendered inaccessible for extended periods. Estonia's banking system was also heavily impacted, with major banks experiencing outages that prevented customers from accessing their accounts or conducting transactions. The coordination of these cyberattacks with Russian political dynamics was evident. The timing of the attacks coincided with the height of the controversy surrounding the memorial's relocation, suggesting a deliberate attempt to exploit the situation to create chaos and undermine the Estonian government. Despite substantial evidence pointing to Russian state involvement, including the use of Russian-language instructions about it on hacking forums and the targeting of Estonian institutions critical to national security and daily life, the Kremlin denied any responsibility. The attacks, however, were widely interpreted as a form of retaliation for the

Estonian hostile act and a demonstration of Russia's capabilities in cyber warfare (Rfe/rl, 2009). This event was a wake-up call for the international community, highlighting the potential for cyberattacks to be used as tools of political coercion and warfare. Estonia's experience underscored the vulnerabilities of even highly digitized and advanced societies to cyber threats. The attack also prompted NATO's reaction with establishment of the Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn to enhance cyber defense capabilities among member states.

The Five-Day War between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 provided another significant example of Russia's use of cyberattacks in coordination with military operations. The conflict was sparked by Georgia's attempt to regain control over its breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which had been supported by Russia. As Russian military forces advanced into Georgian territory, a series of cyberattacks were launched against the Georgian government websites and key infrastructures. These attacks included DDoS assaults and website defacements, targeting the websites of the Georgian president, government ministries, and various media outlets. The cyberattacks aimed to disrupt communication, sow confusion, and hinder the Georgian government's ability to respond to the unfolding military confrontation (Markoff 2008). For instance, as Russian forces prepared to launch airstrikes on the Georgian city of Gori, the city's government websites were taken offline, preventing the dissemination of information and instructions to the public and exacerbating panic among civilians. The coordination between the cyberattacks and the physical military advances was evident. This dual approach of using both cyber and kinetic operations demonstrated sophisticated tactics used to paralyze an adversary's response capabilities and enhance the effectiveness of military actions. Despite Russia's denial of involvement, the evidence suggested a high level of coordination between the cyber operations and the military campaign that only a state could carry. Furthermore, the cyberattacks were traced back to servers in Russia, while the timing and targets of the attacks aligned closely with the objectives of the Russian military. This integration of cyber and conventional warfare tactics again illustrated a new dimension of warfare, where cyber capabilities are used to complement and amplify traditional military operations.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent conflict in Eastern Ukraine present some of the most prominent instances of Russia's strategic use of cyber capabilities. Following the Euromaidan protests, Russia swiftly moved to annex Crimea. This action was also accompanied by a range of cyber operations aimed at destabilizing Ukraine and facilitating the annexation process. During the initial occupation of Crimea, the Ukrainian government and military communication systems were targeted by sophisticated cyberattacks. The cyber operations included efforts to intercept and disrupt Ukrainian military communications, making it difficult for Ukrainian forces to coordinate their response (Unwala et al., 2015, p. 4). Additionally, malware such as 'Snake' (also known as 'Turla') was deployed to infiltrate Ukrainian government networks, exfiltrate sensitive information, and disrupt critical infrastructure (Sanger and Erlanger 2014). In Eastern Ukraine, Russia continued to leverage cyber capabilities to support separatist movements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions even beyond the Crimean takeover. Cyberattacks were used to undermine the Ukrainian government's efforts to maintain control of the country and to spread pro-Russian propaganda. These operations were part of a broader strategy to destabilize the Ukrainian state, create a protracted conflict, and prevent Ukraine from its desired move closer to the Western alliance and the European Union.

Following the initial annexation of Crimea and the escalation of conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Russia's cyber operations have persistently targeted Ukrainian infrastructure and critical systems. One of the most notable cyberattacks occurred in December 2015 when hackers compromised the Ukrainian power grid, causing widespread blackouts (Zetter, 2016).

Attributed to a group linked to Russian intelligence agencies, this attack used sophisticated malware to infiltrate the control systems of power distribution companies, demonstrating the potential of cyberattacks to cause physical damage and disrupt essential services. In 2016 again, Ukraine's financial sector faced a series of cyberattacks, including the deployment of the "Petya" and "NotPetya" malware. These attacks caused significant economic disruption within Ukraine, while it also had global repercussions, affecting multinational companies and spreading rapidly across borders. The "NotPetya" attack, initially disguised as ransomware, was designed to cause maximum damage by rendering systems inoperable, highlighting the far-reaching impact of state-sponsored cyber warfare and the challenges in attribution and response. Throughout this period, Russia has continued to refine and expand its cyber capabilities, integrating them into its broader military and geopolitical strategy (Bellabarba, 2024).

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has remained a focal point for these efforts, with cyber operations playing a crucial role in maintaining pressure on the Ukrainian government. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the intensity and sophistication of cyberattacks have escalated further. Cyber operations have targeted critical infrastructure, government networks, and communication systems, aiming to cripple Ukraine's ability to respond to military aggression. Due to the nature of modern warfare dependent on the information infrastructure, these attacks have disrupted vital services, created widespread confusion, and amplified the physical impacts of military assaults. Additionally, Russia has employed cyber tools to spread disinformation and propaganda, seeking to undermine Ukrainian people's morale and international support for Ukraine (Pandit, 2022). These post-2022 cyber warfare efforts again underline Russia's commitment to continue leveraging and improving cyber capabilities as a central tactical component of its broader strategy to destabilize Ukraine and re-assert its dominance in the region. These persistent cyber-attacks exemplify the full integration of digital warfare with conventional military operations while also highlighting the fast-developing threat posed by state-sponsored cyber activities in contemporary conflicts.

The integration of cyber operations with broader security tactics underscores Russia's commitment to enhance its technical capabilities while maintaining its own strategic advantage, and making the international response to its actions difficult. By leveraging coercive military power with integrated cyber capabilities, Russia seeks to create instability and challenge the predictability of the Western-dominated world order that major powers, led by the U.S., rely on. This comprehensive strategy highlights its ability to adapt and exploit global vulnerabilities while enhancing Russia's influence.

Conclusion

The main argument of this paper is that Russia's foreign policy under Vladimir Putin strategically leverages uncertainty and unpredictability to disrupt the established post-Cold War international order and advance its geopolitical interests. By intentionally challenging the predictability upon which the U.S. hegemonial global order relies, Russia seeks to create a multipolar world where its influence and power is increased, and its strategic goals are more easily achieved.

This paper is grounded in Kenneth Waltz's theory with three levels of analysis - individual, state, and systemic. At the individual level, Vladimir Putin's leadership is pivotal, with his personal experiences and worldview driving Russia's foreign policy decisions. At the state level, Russia's internal dynamics, including increasingly centralized authority and economic strategies, are organized to support its foreign policy objectives. At the systemic level, the broader international environment and the interactions among states are crucial for understanding how Russia's actions aim to reshape global power dynamics. Emphasizing the systemic level, this paper demonstrates how Russia's foreign policy is designed to achieve

broader objectives by introducing unpredictability into the international system. However, unlike in the Waltzian approach, Putin's strategy of unpredictability is based not only on material power, but on ideational factors as well.

Russia's operationalization of coercive military power is a fundamental tactic in its strategic goal of unpredictability. The conflicts in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014 and 2022), and Syria (2015 and 2024) exemplify how Russia employs direct military interventions to achieve those strategic goals. These actions challenge the predictability of Western-desired outcomes and international responses. By intervening militarily, Russia not only asserts its dominance in a specific theater of conflict but also signals to other states that it is willing and able to use force to protect and advance its interests. In Georgia, the swift and decisive military action during the Five-Day War showcased Russia's capability to use force to maintain its sphere of influence. The annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine further highlighted Russia's readiness to increase strategic advantages through military interventions. The intervention in Syria solidified Russia's role as a key power broker in the Middle East and beyond, demonstrating its ability to project power beyond its immediate neighborhood.

In addition to military power, Russia has also greatly utilized cyber capabilities to create and increase unpredictability in the international system. Cyberattacks on Estonia (2007), Georgia (2008), and Ukraine (2014 and beyond) illustrate how Russia coordinates cyber operations with its broader strategic objectives. The cyberattacks on Estonia and Georgia demonstrated Russia's ability to also use digital tools to achieve political and military goals. The extensive cyber operations in Ukraine, including the disruption of the power grid and financial sector, further underscored the role of cyber tools in Russia's strategy of unpredictability. These actions created long-term strategic uncertainties for Russia's adversaries.

Russia's strategy of unpredictability significantly impacts the international system. By leveraging a multifaceted approach, often with a combination of coercive military power and sophisticated cyber tactics, Russia disrupts the stability and predictability that underpins the new U.S.-led global order. This approach enhances Russia's maneuverability in international affairs, while it also challenges the ideological coherence and stability of the new international system. The extensive use of hybrid tactics highlights Russia's continued adaptability and sophistication in modern statecraft. These tactics create significant uncertainties, making it challenging for other states to anticipate and counter Russian actions effectively. This unpredictability serves as a strategic advantage for Russia, making the Western response less effective (if possible), and allowing the Kremlin to achieve their geopolitical objectives through an increasing degree of deniability and ambiguity of Western-desired objectives.

As shown here, Russia's strategy of unpredictability represents a deliberate and calculated effort to reshape the international order in its favor. By fostering instability and leveraging hybrid tactics, Russia challenges the established norms and power structures, promoting a multipolar world where its influence is strengthened. Understanding this strategy is crucial for policymakers and scholars as they navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape and address the challenges posed by states behaving like Russia, causing the international system to become increasingly fragmented and conflict prone. However, this era of unpredictability also presents opportunities for *rethinking and reforming* international institutions and norms, while remembering that the balance of power encompasses "a balance of all the capacities states choose to use in pursuing their goals" (Waltz, 2001, p. 205). That is why balancing against states like Russia now means renewed commitment to diplomacy, dialogue, and multilateralism, as well as a reevaluation of the major principles that underpin the international system. The challenge for global leaders and policymakers will be to navigate

this Russian-desired unpredictable landscape, while balancing national interests with the need for international cooperation and stability with security, peace, and justice.

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