

## **Towards a Framework for Cognitive-Cultural Offensive Realism: A Psychological Contribution to Understanding the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict**

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**Abstract:** While extensive literature exists on offensive realism and state behaviour, a significant gap remains in understanding how cognitive biases and cultural narratives intersect with structural incentives to shape the course of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. This study introduces a cognitive-cultural offensive realism framework and employs a mixed methods approach, combining discourse analysis, historical process tracing, and game-theoretical modelling, to reveal that Russian strategic decision-making is shaped by material calculations or security dilemmas, and the institutionalisation of historical memory, the operationalisation of psychological predispositions, and the mobilisation of cultural myths in elite discourse. The annexation of Crimea and the escalation in 2022 illustrate how overconfidence, loss aversion, and collective identity narratives can override rationalist expectations, embedding psychological contestation within foreign policy logic. In contrast, Ukrainian resistance and Western responses demonstrate alternative pathways, as each actor recalibrates deterrence, escalation, and alliance-building strategies in response to shifting perceptions of threat and opportunity. Comparative findings demonstrate that the persistence of entrenched narratives and psychological frames in Russian policy has led to recurring miscalculations and fragmented adaptation, rather than seamless strategic coherence, as leaders navigate tensions between historical legitimacy, security imperatives, and evolving international norms. This research identifies three interrelated dynamics: path dependencies sustaining cognitive-cultural patterns in Russian strategic thought; integration of psychological and cultural factors into hybrid warfare; and the complexity of international responses as external actors grapple with unpredictable consequences of identity-driven statecraft. The study's multi-method design advances theoretical understanding and offers practical insights for policymakers addressing the complex realities of contemporary conflict.

**Keywords:** Cognitive-cultural offensive realism, Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Strategic decision-making, Psychological biases, Cultural narrative



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### **Introduction**

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict, which escalated dramatically in February 2022, marks a critical juncture in international relations, demanding a re-evaluation of existing theoretical

frameworks, particularly offensive realism. This theoretical framework, articulated by scholars such as John Mearsheimer and Christopher Layne, posits that states operate within an anarchic global structure and also focuses on maximising their relative power for survival (Berezhnaya, 2016; D'Anieri, 2019; Fleury, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2014). This suggests that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states, survival is the primary goal of great powers, and that states are rational actors. Despite the perspective that offers insights into Vladimir Putin's strategic decisions, especially concerning the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) expansion and regional dominance, it does not adequately capture the complex dynamics behind Russia's actions (Argenbright, 2022; Bahinskyi & Zaiets, 2023; (Smith & Dawson, 2022). This research advocates for a more nuanced understanding, integrating cognitive and cultural dimensions often overlooked by conventional realist analyses, to explore how they interact with strategic incentives. Building on work by scholars, this study examines how these dynamics are central to foreign policy and international relations between Russia and Ukraine. As such, this study contributes to a broader academic discussion on the state of international relations.

To understand the rationale for the war's origins and potential resolutions, existing studies present many explanations. Realist scholars emphasise structural factors and the balance of power (Berezhnaya, 2016; Mearsheimer, 2014), while liberal theorists highlight domestic politics and regime type (Kumar, 2023; (Olsen, 2024) ; Maitra, 2024). However, these perspectives are insufficient to address the significance of Russia's historical connections with Ukraine, deeply rooted cultural narratives, and cognitive biases, all of which profoundly influence Russian decision-making. To clarify, cognitive biases refer to systematic patterns of deviation from norm or rationality in judgment, which in international relations, can affect how leaders perceive threats and make decisions (Wendt, 1999). Cultural narratives are shared stories, symbols, and historical interpretations that shape a group's identity and worldview, influencing how societies understand their place in the world and their relationships with other nations (Argenbright, 2022; Jervis, 2017). These biases, narratives, and historical connections highlight that the filters through which conventional motivations are interpreted are not as standard as previously believed. Traditional offensive realism, therefore, does not fully account for the varied motivations driving state behaviour. Existing theories fall short in capturing the intricate dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine relationship, which is shaped by psychological tendencies, cultural narratives, and the weight of historical experience (Eric & Adunimay, 2023). These elements are central to understanding the strategic decisions made by Putin, as they reveal how deeply embedded perceptions and collective memory influence policy choices. Recognising the significance of these cognitive and cultural factors provides a more comprehensive explanation for the origins and persistence of the conflict, as emphasised by numerous scholars and researchers (Johnson, 2023; (Smith & Dawson, 2022); (Wendt, 1999); (Zhou & Chen, 2023).

This article introduces "cognitive-cultural offensive realism" as a novel theoretical framework to enhance our understanding. The framework combines discourse analysis, historical process tracing, and game-theoretical modelling. It integrates insights from cognitive psychology and constructivism with offensive realism to address the limitations of purely structural approaches. The study also explains the purpose of this research, which has a novelty that is different from previous research, which has not considered the cultural and cognitive effects. Cognitive-cultural offensive realism integrates cognitive psychology and constructivism with offensive realism to address the limitations of purely structural approaches, with previous scholars claiming that they have an understanding of what can result in success

(Bahinsky & Zaiets, 2023). The integration of cognitive and cultural elements enriches comprehension of state actions in the 21st century, as they have not been previously analysed through this novel framework. It also moves beyond conventional realist accounts and promotes understanding of realist principles (Ariba, 2023; (Waltz, 2008); (Zhou & Chen, 2023). Traditional models inadequately address the importance of cognitive biases and cultural narratives in shaping state behaviour, thus necessitating a new framework (Motyl, 2015).

The new mixed-methods design combines discourse analysis, historical process tracing, and game-theoretical modelling. This approach is employed to broadly capture relevant factors and integrate them within a novel framework, enabling the derivation of new conclusions that previous studies have not addressed. The research also seeks to assess the significance of cultural identity, historical grievances, and cognitive biases in Russia's foreign policy decisions. Drawing upon insights from political psychology, cultural studies, and international relations theory (Eric & Adunimay, 2023; (Walt, 1987), the design utilises a range of empirical materials, including discourse analysis, policy documents, elite interviews, and case studies. Synthesising these approaches, the research advances a nuanced and holistic explanation of Russia's actions in Ukraine. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether cognitive-cultural factors are peripheral or central to understanding state behaviour in contemporary international crises (Недедкин et al., 2017); (Jervis, 2017). This framework offers theoretical innovation and practical relevance for scholars and policymakers grappling with the complexities of modern conflict, as it provides a new lens through which to analyse previous, contemporary, and potential future conflicts. This approach helps to answer the questions:

- i. How do cognitive biases and cultural narratives interact with structural incentives to shape Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine?
- ii. In what ways do these factors challenge or complement the explanatory power of traditional offensive realism?
- iii. What new insights can a cognitive-cultural approach offer for understanding the escalation and conduct of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical landscape for understanding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be broadly divided into structural and ideational approaches. Structural approaches, primarily represented by offensive realism, emphasise the anarchic nature of the international system and the pursuit of power as the primary drivers of state behaviour (Mearsheimer, 2014). Offensive realism views states as rational actors constantly seeking to maximise their relative power to ensure their survival in a self-help world (Schmidt & Wight, 2023); (Waltz, 2008). This perspective suggests that Russia's actions in Ukraine are primarily driven by its desire to maintain its sphere of influence and prevent NATO expansion, which it perceives as a direct threat to its security (Chauhdry & Ali, 2024; Gisel et al., 2020; (Okamoto et al., 2023). Russia views NATO expansion as a direct threat to its security and has consistently sought to counter this perceived threat through military and political means. This is done to retain some of its previous power and status (Dinc, 2023). However, the almost purely structural lens struggles to explain the intensity and specific nature of Russia's actions, such as the emphasis on historical claims and cultural unity (Maitra, 2024).

Ideational approaches, encompassing constructivism and cognitive psychology, offer alternative explanations that focus on the role of ideas, identities, and perceptions in shaping state behaviour (Wendt, 1999). Constructivist scholars argue that state interests and identities are socially constructed and that these factors can significantly influence foreign policy decisions (Zhou & Chen, 2023). Similarly, cognitive psychology highlights the importance of cognitive biases and perceptions in shaping decision-making processes (Jervis, 2017). Balance of threat theory suggests that states balance against perceived threats, not just power, thus incorporating ideational factors into the analysis (Walt, 1987). These perspectives suggest that Russia's actions in Ukraine are also driven by its historical grievances, cultural narratives, and perceptions of Ukrainian identity. The emphasis placed by Putin on the notion that Russia and Ukraine are one people is essential (Eric & Adunimay, 2023). These factors cannot be fully explained by offensive realism alone. It is difficult to use the structural and ideational factors to understand the whole argument without the influence of the cognitive and cultural effects.

Traditional theories inadequately capture the complexity of the Russia-Ukraine relationship, which incorporates cognitive biases, cultural narratives, and historical memory (Zhou & Chen, 2023). To address these limitations, this study proposes a novel theoretical framework termed "cognitive-cultural offensive realism". The approach combines discourse analysis, historical process tracing, and game-theoretical modelling. It integrates insights from cognitive psychology and constructivism with offensive realism to address the limitations of purely structural approaches (Blagden, 2021; (Walt, 1987)). This framework acknowledges the anarchic nature of the international system and the importance of power maximisation, but also recognises the role of cognitive biases, cultural narratives, and historical experiences in shaping state perceptions and decision-making processes (Johnson, 2023). It explores how these factors interact with structural incentives to influence Russian foreign policy. As a result, this framework addresses the gap between these structural and ideational approaches. This is done by providing a more nuanced understanding of state behaviour. This cognitive-cultural offensive realism combines the cognitive and cultural effects of a country or union in cooperation.

## Method

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyse the Russo-Ukrainian conflict through the lens of cognitive-cultural offensive realism. The research design integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a holistic understanding of the complex interplay between structural incentives, psychological factors, and cultural narratives in shaping Russian foreign policy decisions. Triangulation of multiple data sources and analytical techniques enhances the validity and reliability of the findings, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the conflict dynamics (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The primary methods utilised in this study include discourse analysis, historical process tracing, and game-theoretical modelling, each contributing unique insights to the overall analysis. Each method addresses specific research questions while also reinforcing the findings produced by the others.

Discourse analysis forms a crucial component of the methodology, focusing on the examination of official statements, speeches, and policy documents from Russian government sources, as well as media reports and academic publications. This approach, grounded in the work of scholars such as Boubaker et al. (2023) and Johnson (2023), enables the identification of recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and underlying assumptions in Russian foreign policy discourse. Particular attention is paid to how historical

narratives and cultural symbols are invoked to justify and legitimise policy decisions. The discourse analysis also examines how cognitive biases and cultural constructs manifest in the language used by Russian leaders and policymakers, providing insights into the psychological and cultural dimensions of decision-making processes. For example, discourse analysis helps to address the question of *"How do cognitive biases and cultural narratives interact with structural incentives to shape Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine?"* by revealing the specific ways in which Russian leaders frame the conflict in terms of historical grievances and cultural identity. Data sources include speeches by Vladimir Putin, official statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and articles in prominent Russian media outlets. These sources are selected based on their influence in shaping public opinion and policy discourse within Russia. The operation of this method shows how cognitive and cultural effects result in government output and influence the population.

Historical process tracing is employed to map the sequence of events and decisions leading to key moments in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. This method, as outlined by Dowding (2023), allows for the identification of causal mechanisms and the exploration of how structural factors, cognitive biases, and cultural narratives interact over time to shape policy outcomes. The historical analysis draws on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including diplomatic cables, memoirs, and scholarly accounts of Russian-Ukrainian relations. Through careful examination of the historical context, this approach helps to elucidate the long-term patterns and path dependencies that have influenced Russian strategic thinking and behaviour towards Ukraine. This method contributes to answering the research question: *"In what ways do these factors challenge or complement the explanatory power of traditional offensive realism?"* For instance, tracing the events leading up to the annexation of Crimea reveals how Russia's historical claims to the region, combined with its perception of Western encroachment, shaped its decision-making process. Data sources include diplomatic archives from the United States (U.S.) State Department and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as academic case studies of Russian foreign policy. The operation of this method shows what actions resulted in government response, leading to further influence and future strategic thinking.

Game theoretical modelling complements the qualitative methods by providing a formal framework for analysing strategic interactions between Russia and other actors in the international system. Drawing on the work of scholars such as (Barron, 2024) and (Alexander, 2023), this approach allows for the exploration of how different assumptions about preferences, information, and decision-making processes affect outcomes in strategic interactions. The models developed in this study incorporate psychological and cultural factors alongside traditional power considerations, offering a novel extension of game-theoretical approaches to international relations. These models are used to generate testable hypotheses about Russian behaviour under different scenarios, which are then evaluated against empirical evidence from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. This modelling approach addresses the research question: *"What new insights can a cognitive-cultural approach offer for understanding the escalation and conduct of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict?"* Simulating how these factors might lead to different outcomes in strategic interactions is enabled by incorporating cognitive biases and cultural narratives into the models. Examples include modelling the impact of misperceptions on crisis escalation and the role of cultural identity in shaping bargaining behaviour. Data on Russian decision-making and strategic preferences are derived from open-source intelligence, policy statements, and expert opinions. The implementation of this method demonstrates

potential outcomes in specific situations, with the hope that the government and key stakeholders can identify the best course of action.

### Russia's Historical Narratives and Cultural Context

Russian geopolitical perspectives have evolved through a complex layering of historical experience and cultural ideology, both of which exert a powerful influence on present-day foreign policy and strategic orientation. Nowhere is this more evident than in Moscow's stance toward Ukraine, where references to the past are invoked as justification and actively shape ongoing policy choices. The doctrine of 'Russkiy Mir' (Russian World), which has become central under Putin's leadership, illustrates how the Kremlin mobilises historical memory and cultural claims to legitimise its ambitions beyond Russia's borders (Kumar, 2023). This worldview draws on a glorified interpretation of Russia's imperial legacy, promoting the idea of a shared spiritual and cultural heritage among East Slavic peoples. Such narratives serve to undermine the legitimacy of Ukrainian national identity, positioning Ukraine as an integral part of a wider Russian civilisation. The promotion of 'Russkiy Mir' thus provides ideological cover for intervention in Ukraine's affairs, framing these actions as the restoration of a historic community rather than acts of aggression. This strategic use of history and culture does not merely inform rhetoric; it is embedded in policy decisions and military planning, reflecting a broader vision that seeks to reclaim Russia's perceived status and influence on the international stage.

**Table 1**

*Historical Analysis of Key Events in the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict*

Year	Event	Structural Factors	Cognitive/Cultural Factors	Implications for Conflict
1991	Dissolution of the Soviet Union	Ukraine gains independence	Russian perception of loss	Seeds of future conflict
		Loss of Russian influence	Ukrainian national identity assertion	Diverging national trajectories
2004	Orange Revolution	Pro-Western movement in Ukraine	Ukrainian desire for democratisation	Increased tensions
		Russian concerns over NATO expansion	Russian fear of 'colour revolutions'	Hardening of Russian stance
2014	Annexation of Crimea	Strategic importance of Crimea	Russian historical claims to Crimea	Direct confrontation
		Weakness of the Ukrainian military	Putin's desire to assert Russian power	International sanctions on Russia
2015	Minsk Agreements	Attempt at a diplomatic solution	Mutual distrust	Temporary de-escalation
		Ongoing conflict in Donbas	Differing interpretations of agreements	Failure to resolve core issues
2022	Full-Scale Invasion	Perceived threat of NATO expansion	Putin's historical narratives	Major escalation
		Russian military buildup	Miscalculation of Western response	Global geopolitical conflicts

Source: Adapted from various sources, including Mearsheimer (2014), Layne (2006), Berezhnaya (2016), D'Anieri (2019), and (Negri & Dincă, 2023).

A historical examination of pivotal moments in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict reveals a nuanced interplay between structural forces and cognitive-cultural influences that have shaped regional geopolitics across decades. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 represented a watershed, with Ukraine's assertion of independence generating profound feelings of loss within Russia and prompting a redefinition of national identities and strategic priorities. This divergence established the context for ongoing friction, as Russia sought to preserve its sphere of influence while Ukraine moved to consolidate its sovereignty (Berezhnaya, 2015), (Erakeh et al., 2023). The Orange Revolution in 2004 further heightened these tensions, fuelled by Ukraine's westward orientation and Russia's anxiety over NATO's proximity, which intensified Moscow's perception of external threat and led to a more entrenched posture toward Ukraine and neighbouring states (Blagden, 2021).

The 2014 annexation of Crimea stands as a clear example of how structural imperatives and cognitive factors converge, with Russia drawing upon historical claims and strategic interests to rationalise its intervention, taking advantage of Ukraine's military vulnerabilities at the time. This episode triggered significant international sanctions and marked a turning point in regional relations (Chauhdry & Ali, 2024); (Smith & Dawson, 2022). The Minsk Agreements of 2015, intended to provide a diplomatic path forward, ultimately faltered due to persistent mistrust and divergent interpretations, illustrating the challenges inherent in conflict resolution (Negri & Dincă, 2023). The large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constituted an unprecedented escalation, marked by extensive military mobilisation and misjudgements regarding the likely international response, which have since reshaped European security and global alliances (Appel, 2024); Dinc, 2023).

Beyond these events, the psychological legacy of history exerts substantial influence on Russian foreign policy and strategic thinking. The memory of the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War as it is known in Russia, continues to serve as a foundational element of national identity. (Mujadid & Kiran, 2024) note that the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany has been recast in post-Soviet Russia as a distinctly Russian achievement, underpinning claims to great power status. This narrative is frequently mobilised by the Putin administration to frame current conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, as part of an enduring struggle against external threats. Invoking these historical parallels enables Russian leaders to legitimise aggressive policies as defensive measures, while simultaneously rallying domestic support through appeals to collective memory (Boubaker et al., 2023).

Cultural constructs, particularly the ideals of 'derzhavnost' (great power status) and Russia's self-conception as a civilisation straddling Europe and Asia, further shape strategic culture. As Drezner (2021) and (Reichwein, 2024) observe, these constructs foster a worldview in which Russia positions itself as a defender against Western cultural and political dominance, reinforcing a narrative of protecting alternative values. The notion of 'Russian exceptionalism' is closely linked, suggesting that Russia's unique historical trajectory necessitates a path distinct from Western liberal models. The resurgence of 'Eurasianism' in post-Soviet discourse underscores Russia's claim to a special geopolitical role, advocating closer alignment with former Soviet states and resistance to Western encroachment (Olsen, 2024). This blend of cultural and historical influences informs domestic policy and external engagement, resulting in a strategic culture that

prioritises sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the promotion of a multipolar world order.

The convergence of these historical and cultural elements produces a strategic outlook characterised by deep suspicion of Western intentions and a readiness to utilise force in defence of perceived national interests. (Mujadid & Kiran, 2024) contend that this mindset underpins Russia's assertive policy toward Ukraine, viewing the country as integral to its own historical and cultural sphere. Actions such as the annexation of Crimea and ongoing operations in eastern Ukraine reflect a broader ambition to reassert Russia's status as a great power while resisting Western influence. Appreciating the depth and persistence of these cultural and historical drivers is essential for a nuanced understanding of Russia's international conduct, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict with Ukraine. This perspective calls for analytical approaches that move beyond narrow realist interpretations, emphasising the importance of cultural and historical dimensions in contemporary geopolitical analysis.

### **Putin's Personal Worldview and Decision-Making**

Putin's worldview and psychological disposition have been deeply influenced by his tenure in the Committee for State Security (KGB) and his experiences during the volatile years that followed the Soviet Union's dissolution. According to (Appel, 2024), the formative environment of Soviet intelligence instilled in Putin an enduring mistrust of Western intentions and a conviction that only a robust, centralised authority could safeguard Russian interests. This background has shaped his preference for secrecy, reliance on a close-knit group of confidants with similar security backgrounds, and a tendency to bypass formal institutional checks. Argenbright (2022) describes Putin's governing style as 'manual control', reflecting his inclination to concentrate authority in his own hands and marginalise broader institutional input. The instability and perceived humiliation of the 1990s further entrenched his belief in the necessity of reasserting Russian power, motivating a foreign policy agenda focused on restoring influence over neighbouring states and countering perceived Western encroachment (Drezner, 2021; Fleury, 2023).

Cognitive distortions play a significant role in shaping Putin's strategic outlook and the risks he is willing to take. Leaders in his position, as (Okamoto et al., 2023) note, often fall prey to the 'fundamental attribution error', interpreting adversaries' actions as inherently hostile while rationalising their own as defensive. This mindset is evident in Putin's interpretation of NATO's expansion, which he regards as a direct threat to Russian security rather than as a protective measure for bordering nations. Johnson (2023) identifies a persistent 'overconfidence bias' in Putin's assessments, leading him to overrate Russia's strengths and underestimate Western unity and resolve, an error starkly revealed during the miscalculated invasion of Ukraine. (Zhou & Chen, 2023) further highlight the role of 'confirmation bias', with Putin favouring information that supports his convictions about Western antagonism and Russian uniqueness, while disregarding evidence to the contrary.

The consequences of Putin's leadership style for Russian foreign policy are extensive and transformative. Russia's external conduct under his rule has become more assertive and revisionist, challenging the established U.S.-led order without seeking its outright destruction. Kumar (2023) characterises this approach as 'neo-revisionist', aimed at renegotiating Russia's global standing rather than overturning the entire system. This strategy has been visible in the annexation of Crimea, military operations in Syria, and efforts to influence Western political processes. (Нефедкин et al., 2017) observes

that decision-making on foreign policy is highly centralised, with Putin often consulting only a select group of security officials, thus bypassing traditional bureaucratic and diplomatic channels. Such concentration of authority has introduced greater unpredictability and volatility, as seen in the abrupt escalation against Ukraine in 2022. Moreover, Putin's advocacy for 'sovereign democracy' and his opposition to Western liberal norms have shaped Russia's engagement with international institutions, frequently placing Moscow at odds with prevailing global standards (Negri & Dincă, 2023).

### Structural Incentives and the International System

The security landscape that emerged after the Cold War was marked by a dramatic realignment of global power. The United States assumed the role of the predominant superpower, while NATO's reach steadily extended eastward, fundamentally altering the strategic context in which Russia operates. According to Mearsheimer (2014), this era of U.S. dominance incentivised Washington to pursue liberal hegemony, promoting democracy and expanding NATO's footprint into territories that once belonged to the Soviet sphere. Although these initiatives were framed as efforts to foster stability across Europe, Russian policymakers have interpreted them as encroachments on their security and influence. Persistent concerns over NATO's advance, especially under Putin's leadership, stem from the belief that Western leaders backtracked on informal commitments made to Mikhail Gorbachev during German reunification (Bahinskyi & Zaiets, 2023).

Since the 1990s, the enlargement of NATO has remained a central preoccupation in Moscow's strategic outlook. The alliance's expansion from 16 to 30 members over three decades has been viewed as a direct challenge to Russia's traditional sphere of influence and a source of military vulnerability. (Trantidis, 2024) suggests that Russia's interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine from 2014 onward were calculated moves to establish boundaries against further NATO encroachment. Russian officials frequently assert that the alliance's growth risks isolating Russia and surrounding it with hostile forces. This anxiety has only intensified with the deployment of NATO missile defence systems in Eastern Europe, which Moscow sees as undermining its nuclear deterrence capability (Appel, 2024). The 2014 revision of Russian military doctrine, which designates NATO expansion as the principal external threat, underscores the centrality of this issue in Russian security thinking.

Economic recovery and shifting geopolitical realities have further shaped Russia's approach to the post-Cold War order. The turmoil of the 1990s gave way to renewed confidence under Putin, fuelled by a resurgence in energy exports and a more assertive foreign policy stance. Drezner (2021) observes that this economic revival emboldened Moscow to challenge the Western-dominated international system more openly. Securing influence over energy corridors and markets, especially in Europe, has become a cornerstone of Russian strategy. At the same time, Russian foreign policy elites have advanced the concept of 'multipolarity,' seeking to dilute U.S. dominance and cultivate a global environment more conducive to Russian interests (Eric & Adunimay, 2023). This vision has driven efforts to deepen partnerships with China, promote the Eurasian Economic Union, and extend Russian influence into the Middle East and Africa. The interplay of these economic and geopolitical motivations has produced a multifaceted strategy that aims to balance aspirations for great power status with the imperative to manage security risks and economic vulnerabilities.

## Results: A Case Study of The Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict serves as a compelling case study for applying the cognitive-cultural offensive realism framework, providing insights into the complex interplay of structural incentives, psychological biases, and cultural narratives that shape Russian decision-making. This analysis focuses on key events in the conflict, examining how they align with or deviate from the predictions of traditional offensive realism. It is important to recognise and understand that as new actions and decisions occur, they can influence strategic thought and action.

### 1. Cultural/Historical Context

*Hypothesis 1: The decision to annex Crimea was influenced more by cultural narratives of historical sovereignty than by pure strategic calculations.*

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 represents a critical juncture in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, offering substantial evidence in support of Hypothesis 1. Whilst traditional offensive realism interprets this action primarily as a strategic manoeuvre to secure vital assets and expand Russia's sphere of influence, the cognitive-cultural framework reveals a more nuanced interplay between geopolitical calculations and deeply rooted cultural narratives. Putin's decision to annex Crimea was significantly influenced by the historical narrative of Crimea as an integral part of Russian cultural heritage, a perspective that resonates deeply within Russian collective memory (Smith & Dawson, 2022). This cultural dimension interacted with strategic considerations, such as the need to secure the Black Sea Fleet base, ultimately leading to a decision that served Russia's geopolitical interests and struck a powerful emotional chord with the Russian public. For example, the security of the black sea fleet is a structural impact that has cultural impacts.

The prominence of cultural narratives in the decision-making process aligns with Leahy's (2024) assertion that Russian foreign policy is deeply rooted in cultural and historical constructs. The concept of Crimea as a historically Russian territory, dating back to its annexation by Catherine the Great in 1783, has been a persistent theme in Russian political discourse. This historical claim, coupled with the region's strategic importance, created a potent justification for annexation that transcended purely rational strategic calculations. The emotional resonance of 'returning' Crimea to Russia was evident in the surge of public support for the annexation, with approval ratings for Putin soaring in its aftermath (Argenbright, 2022);(Erameh et al., 2023). This public reaction underscores the significance of cultural narratives in shaping policy decisions and public perceptions. The structural importance that results in public perception shows the interplay of cultural and structural effects.

Furthermore, the timing and manner of the annexation suggest a prioritisation of cultural and historical considerations over immediate strategic gains. The swift and relatively bloodless nature of the takeover, coupled with the orchestration of a referendum on Crimean independence, indicates a desire to frame the annexation as a legitimate reclamation of Russian territory rather than a purely military conquest. This approach aligns more closely with a narrative of historical sovereignty than with the expectations of traditional offensive realism, which would prioritise strategic advantage over legitimacy concerns (Jervis, 2017; (Reichwein, 2024). The emphasis on cultural ties and historical claims in official Russian rhetoric surrounding the annexation further supports the hypothesis that cultural narratives played a dominant role in the decision-making process. All of these actions resulted in justification and the need to prioritise all the

factors that were involved.

*Hypothesis 2: The timing and scale of the invasion were influenced by psychological biases within the Russian leadership regarding Western resolve.*

The Russian decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provides substantial evidence supporting Hypothesis 2. The timing and scale of the invasion suggest a significant influence of psychological biases within the Russian leadership, particularly regarding their perception of Western resolve. Putin's repeated references to historical unity between Russians and Ukrainians indicate a cognitive bias towards viewing the conflict through the lens of past imperial glory (ANTONY, 2023); (Smith & Dawson, 2022). This historical narrative likely contributed to an overestimation of potential support for Russian actions within Ukraine and an underestimation of Ukrainian resistance. The concept of 'Russkiy Mir' (Russian World), as articulated by Maitra (2024), further reinforces this perspective, suggesting that Russian leaders viewed the invasion as both a geopolitical manoeuvre and a restoration of perceived historical and cultural ties. This cognitive framework may have led to a distorted assessment of the potential consequences and international reactions to such a large-scale military action.

The Russian leadership's apparent miscalculation of Western unity and resolve in responding to the invasion aligns with (Zhou & Chen, 2023) concept of cognitive biases, such as wishful thinking and mirror-imaging in international politics. These biases may have led to an overly optimistic assessment of the West's willingness to intervene decisively on Ukraine's behalf. The timing of the invasion, coming at a point when the Russian leadership may have perceived Western resolve to be at a low ebb due to factors such as the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and internal EU disagreements, further supports this hypothesis. Moreover, the Russian leadership may have interpreted the West's response to previous actions, such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014, as indicative of a limited appetite for substantial intervention (Dinc, 2023). This misinterpretation of past events, coupled with a potential overestimation of Russia's own economic and military resilience in the face of sanctions, likely contributed to the decision to proceed with a full-scale invasion.

Drezner's (2021) observation that framing NATO expansion as an existential threat to Russian civilisation amplified the perceived urgency of action and offered additional insight into the psychological factors influencing the invasion's timing and scale. This perception of threat, viewed through the lens of psychological biases, may have contributed to the decision to launch a full-scale invasion rather than pursuing alternative strategies. The scale of the invasion, which initially aimed for a swift decapitation of the Ukrainian government, indicates an overconfidence in Russian military capabilities and an underestimation of Ukrainian resistance, both potentially stemming from psychological biases within the Russian leadership. This overconfidence may have been reinforced by the relatively swift and successful annexation of Crimea in 2014, leading Russian strategists to anticipate a similar outcome on a larger scale (Kumar, 2023). Furthermore, the decision to commit such significant military resources suggests a failure to fully consider or accurately assess the potential for prolonged conflict and the associated economic and diplomatic costs, reflecting a form of optimism bias in strategic planning.

## 2. Strategic/Military

*Hypothesis 3: The escalation of military conflict in Eastern Ukraine correlates with increased*

*international sanctions and domestic unrest within Russia.*

To analyse the strategic dynamics between Russia and Ukraine/West in the context of the Eastern Ukraine conflict, we can model their interactions using game theory. The following payoff matrix represents the key decision points for Russia (Escalate, Maintain Status Quo, De-escalate) and Ukraine/West (Resist, Negotiate, Concede), where payoffs reflect territorial control, economic impacts, and status considerations.

**Table 2**

*First Game-Theoretical Model of Strategic Interactions in the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict*

Strategies	Ukraine/West: Resist	Ukraine/West: Negotiate	Ukraine/West: Concede
Russia: Escalate	Russia: 4 (5 - 3 + 2)	Russia: 3 (2 - 1 + 2)	Russia: 2 (1 - 0 + 1)
Russia: Maintain Status Quo	Russia: 1 (0 - 0 + 1)	Russia: 2 (1 - 0 + 1)	Russia: -1 (0 - 1 + 0)
Russia: De-escalate	Russia: -1 (-2 + 1)	Russia: 1 (0 + 1)	Russia: 0 (0 - 0 + 0)

Source: Author's own contributions

The game-theoretical model presented in Table 2 provides a valuable framework for analysing the relationship between the military escalation in Eastern Ukraine, international sanctions, and domestic unrest within Russia. The model's payoff structure reflects the complex interplay of material gains, economic costs, and status considerations that influence Russian decision-making. However, to fully address Hypothesis 3, we must consider how these payoffs evolve in response to increased sanctions and domestic pressure. Economic stability is needed to retain trust from the people, especially in times of conflict. Blagden (2021) argues that the initial Russian calculation of a 4 payoff for escalation (5 for territorial gain, -3 for economic costs, +2 for status boost) may have underestimated the long-term impact of international sanctions and domestic discontent. As the conflict has progressed, the economic costs associated with escalation have likely increased due to the cumulative effect of sanctions, potentially altering the payoff structure and making the "Maintain Status Quo" or "De-escalate" options more attractive (Erameh et al., 2023). The international sanctions play a large role in the economic impact.

The correlation between military escalation and increased sanctions is evident in the historical trajectory of the conflict. (Bahinskyi & Zaiets, 2023) note that each major escalation in Eastern Ukraine has been met with progressively harsher sanctions from the international community, particularly the United States and the European Union. This pattern suggests a direct relationship between military actions and economic consequences, supporting the first part of Hypothesis 3. The sanctions are meant to disincentivise similar actions in the future. However, the link between escalation and domestic unrest is more complex and less linear. Kumar (2023) observes that while economic hardships resulting from sanctions have led to pockets of discontent within Russia, the Kremlin's control over media narratives and suppression of dissent have largely contained widespread unrest. This challenges the straightforward correlation proposed in the hypothesis and suggests that domestic factors may have a delayed or muted impact on strategic decision-making. Media and information often influence a change in belief, perspective, and create divides amongst groups.

The model's incorporation of psychological factors, such as status considerations (+2 in the escalation

payoff), aligns with Leahy's (2024) analysis of the role of national identity and prestige in Russian foreign policy. However, as the conflict persists, the status boost from aggressive actions may diminish, potentially reducing the attractiveness of the "Escalate" option. Furthermore, (Zhou & Chen, 2023) argue that prolonged conflict and economic strain may gradually erode public support for military adventures, even if this does not immediately translate into visible unrest. This suggests that the relationship between escalation, sanctions, and domestic pressure may operate on different timescales, with economic impacts preceding visible social unrest. To more accurately reflect the dynamics proposed in Hypothesis 3, the game-theoretical model could be expanded to include a temporal dimension, showing how payoffs change over time as sanctions accumulate and domestic pressures build. Economic distress in conjunction with influence has long-lasting implications. Additionally, incorporating a more nuanced representation of domestic factors, such as public opinion and elite cohesion, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how internal dynamics influence strategic choices. These refinements would allow for a more robust testing of the hypothesis and a deeper exploration of the complex interplay between military actions, international responses, and domestic political considerations in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

*Hypothesis 4: The integration of advanced military technology will enhance Ukraine's defensive capabilities, leading to a decrease in Russian aggression.*

The integration of advanced military technology into Ukraine's defensive arsenal has significantly altered the strategic landscape of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, providing evidence both supporting and challenging Hypothesis 4. The influx of Western-supplied advanced weaponry, including precision-guided munitions, anti-tank systems, and sophisticated air defence platforms, has undeniably bolstered Ukraine's defensive capabilities (Marigliano et al., 2024). This technological enhancement has enabled Ukraine to mount a more effective resistance against Russian aggression, potentially increasing the costs associated with further escalation for Russia. Better defensive capabilities can prevent Russia from escalating. For instance, the deployment of High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) has allowed Ukraine to strike Russian command posts and ammunition depots with unprecedented accuracy, disrupting Russian logistics and forcing a re-evaluation of offensive strategies ((Неведкин et al., 2017)). This aligns with the hypothesis, suggesting that advanced technology can indeed serve as a deterrent to aggression by raising the potential costs of military action. Defensive technologies, in conjunction with proper implementation, can greatly enhance the chances of defensive capabilities.

However, the relationship between technological advancement and reduced aggression is not straightforward. While Ukraine's enhanced defensive capabilities have forced Russia to adapt its tactics, they have not necessarily led to a consistent decrease in aggression. The introduction of advanced Western systems has instead prompted Russia to pursue alternative forms of warfare, particularly in cyber warfare and information operations (Olsen, 2024). Russia changed the actions that they previously sought. This adaptive response challenges the linear relationship proposed in Hypothesis 4, suggesting that technological advancements may lead to a transformation of aggression rather than an outright reduction. Moreover, the introduction of advanced technology has sparked an arms race dynamic, with Russia intensifying efforts to develop countermeasures and modernise its own military capabilities (Reichwein, 2024). This escalatory spiral complicates the assessment of technology's impact on conflict dynamics, highlighting the need for a

more nuanced understanding of how technological advancements interact with strategic decision-making in modern warfare. The modernisation can result in new ethical issues previously unconsidered.

*Hypothesis 5: The perceived risk of nuclear escalation will significantly deter offensive military actions by Ukraine.*

As the conflict evolved, the threat of nuclear escalation became a significant factor, particularly in the context of Ukraine's potential offensive actions. This new game-theoretic model captures the strategic landscape where Ukraine considers a major offensive using advanced technology (like Starlink), while Russia contemplates nuclear threats as a deterrent. The payoff matrix below illustrates the potential outcomes and risks for both actors.

**Table 3**

*Second Game-Theoretical Model of Strategic Interactions in the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict*

Strategies	Ukraine (O)	Ukraine (NO)
Russia: Nuclear Threat	Ukraine: -10 (potential nuclear devastation) Russia: -8 (international condemnation and escalation risks)	Ukraine: -2 (minimal risk but under threat) Russia: 0 (maintains threat without consequences)
Russia: No Nuclear Threat	Ukraine: 5 (territorial gain) Russia: -3 (territorial loss)	Ukraine: 1 (status quo maintained) Russia: 1 (status quo maintained)

Source: Author's own contributions

The game-theoretical model presented in Table 3 offers valuable insights into the strategic dynamics of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, particularly in light of the 2024 U.S. election results. The results indicate that the threat of nuclear escalation has been a persistent deterrent shaping both Ukrainian and Western military calculations. Structurally, Russia's nuclear arsenal and explicit signalling serve as a formidable constraint, consistent with offensive realism's emphasis on the balance of power and deterrence (Mearsheimer, 2014). However, a deeper analysis reveals that this deterrence is not simply a function of material capability. Russian leadership, particularly Putin, has strategically employed nuclear rhetoric to signal resolve and exploit Western psychological biases, such as loss aversion and risk sensitivity, thereby amplifying the deterrent effect beyond what raw capabilities alone would suggest (Zhou & Chen, 2023).

Culturally, the Russian narrative of existential threat, framing NATO support for Ukraine as an assault on Russia's very identity, heightens the perceived legitimacy of nuclear threats in the Kremlin's worldview (ANTONY, 2023). This narrative is internalised by Russian elites and the public, reinforcing the leadership's willingness to escalate rhetorically. For Ukraine and its partners, historical memory of Chernobyl and the legacy of Soviet nuclear doctrine further shape risk perceptions, making the prospect of escalation especially salient (Berebon, 2023). The interaction of these structural, cognitive, and cultural elements produces a powerful chilling effect: even limited Ukrainian offensives are carefully calibrated to avoid crossing perceived Russian red lines, demonstrating how deterrence is not just about weapons, but about shared narratives and mutual psychological manipulation (Drezner, 2021).

### 3. Domestic/International Factors

*Hypothesis 6: Increased domestic pressure in Russia, stemming from economic sanctions, will lead to*

*a higher likelihood of strategic de-escalation.*

The impact of economic sanctions on Russia's domestic landscape and their subsequent influence on strategic decision-making presents a complex and evolving picture that both supports and challenges Hypothesis 6. Western sanctions, unprecedented in scope and depth, have targeted Russia's financial system, energy sector, and key individuals, aiming to weaken Russia's ability to finance and sustain its war in Ukraine (Blagden, 2021; Dinc, 2023). These measures have resulted in a contraction of Russia's GDP, a sharp decline in trade with sanctioning countries, surging inflation, high interest rates, and a dramatic drop in oil and gas revenues, factors that collectively erode the country's economic resilience (Marigliano et al., 2024; Kumar, 2023; Maitra, 2024).

Structurally, these economic shocks increase the long-term costs of continued aggression and alter the strategic calculus for Russia's leadership (Mujadid & Kiran, 2024). However, the pathway from sanctions to de-escalation is neither direct nor uniform. Initially, Russia demonstrated resilience, supported by pre-war financial buffers, state interventions, and alternative trade partnerships (Mujadid & Kiran, 2024). Over time, though, the cumulative effects of sanctions, shrinking GDP, declining export revenues, and workforce shortages, have begun to manifest more acutely, particularly as Russia's capacity to draw on reserves diminishes and its economy shifts towards a more centrally managed, less innovative model (Boubaker et al., 2023); D'Anieri, 2019). This structural weakening increases domestic pressure on the regime, especially as inflation and economic hardship become more pronounced for ordinary citizens.

Cognitively and culturally, the Russian leadership's response to sanctions is shaped by both psychological biases and national narratives. The Kremlin has sought to frame sanctions as evidence of Western hostility, invoking historical narratives of resilience and external threat to foster a "rally around the flag" effect and suppress overt dissent (ANTONY, 2023); Johnson, 2023). This framing can temporarily bolster public support for aggressive policies, complicating the linear relationship between economic hardship and de-escalation (Chaudhry & Ali, 2024). Nevertheless, as Motyl (2015) and Dinc (2023) note, prolonged hardship—manifested in declining living standards, rising unemployment, and visible shortages—can gradually erode this support, especially among urban and educated populations, increasing latent dissatisfaction and the risk of social unrest.

The interplay between these factors is dynamic: while structural economic decline raises the costs of war and increases domestic pressure, cognitive and cultural mechanisms may delay or blunt the effect of this pressure on policy change. Over time, however, as the economic situation deteriorates and the effectiveness of state narratives wanes, the leadership may be compelled to reassess its aggressive posture and consider de-escalation or diplomatic solutions (Blagden, 2021; Motyl, 2015). The evidence thus suggests that while sanctions alone do not guarantee immediate de-escalation, their cumulative impact, mediated by domestic political dynamics and the limits of cognitive-cultural resilience, can shift strategic preferences in the direction of reduced aggression, particularly if economic pain becomes acute and widespread (Appel, 2024); Boubaker et al., 2023; Kumar, 2023).

*Hypothesis 7: Increased Western military support for Ukraine will correlate with a decrease in Russian willingness to escalate the conflict.*

The relationship between Western military support for Ukraine and Russian escalation strategies is

highly dynamic, shaped by a complex interplay of structural, cognitive, and cultural factors. The introduction of advanced Western military technology, including drones, long-range missiles, and sophisticated air defence systems, has significantly altered the strategic landscape, raising the operational costs for Russia and complicating its ability to achieve battlefield objectives (Eric & Adunimay, 2023; Gisel et al., 2020; (Olsen, 2024). Empirically, as Ukraine has leveraged this support to disrupt Russian supply lines and command centres, there have been observable instances where Russia has refrained from large-scale escalation, aligning with the hypothesis that increased Western support can deter further aggression by raising the costs and risks for Moscow (Blagden, 2021); (D'Anieri, 2019).

However, this deterrent effect is neither uniform nor absolute. Russian leadership perceives the conflict as both a military contest and a broader geopolitical struggle against NATO and the West, which shapes rhetoric and strategic choices (Fleury, 2023; (Okamoto et al., 2023). At times, increased Western involvement has led to a hardening of Russian resolve, with Moscow framing the conflict as an existential struggle and threatening significant retaliation if Western-supplied weapons are used against targets inside Russia (Johnson, 2023). Russian officials and state media have repeatedly warned that the use of long-range Western missiles against Russian territory would be met with “adequate and significant” responses, and recent statements by Kremlin spokespersons underscore that halting Western military aid is now a precondition for any negotiated ceasefire (Trantidis, 2024).

Cognitively, Russian decision-makers weigh the risks of escalation against the perceived threat to regime security and national prestige, often influenced by psychological biases such as loss aversion and the tendency to interpret Western actions through a lens of historical encirclement (Blagden, 2021). The Kremlin's information campaigns seek to amplify Western divisions and foster pessimism about Ukraine's prospects, aiming to erode allied cohesion and slow the flow of military aid (D'Anieri, 2019; Gisel et al., 2020). Culturally, the portrayal of the conflict as a defensive war against Western aggression resonates with domestic audiences, reinforcing support for the regime and justifying continued resistance even in the face of mounting losses (Fleury, 2023). Recent developments illustrate the complexity of these dynamics. For example, the incremental and carefully calibrated provision of advanced Western weapons, such as the phased delivery of long-range missiles and F-16 aircraft, reflects Western efforts to avoid crossing Russian red lines and triggering uncontrollable escalation (Zhou & Chen, 2023). At the same time, incidents like Elon Musk's decision to restrict Starlink access for Ukrainian forces in Crimea highlight how escalation risk is perceived and managed by states and influential non-state actors, further complicating the strategic environment.

*Hypothesis 8: Cognitive biases such as overconfidence and loss aversion will lead to strategic miscalculations by both Russia and Ukraine during the conflict.*

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict offers a compelling case study of how cognitive biases, when intertwined with cultural narratives and structural realities, can drive strategic miscalculations by Russia and Ukraine. In the early stages of the 2022 invasion, Russian leadership demonstrated pronounced overconfidence bias, overestimating the effectiveness of their armed forces and underestimating the resilience of Ukrainian defence and the resolve of Western allies (Zhou & Chen, 2023). This overconfidence was not simply a matter of flawed military intelligence; it was reinforced by deep-seated cultural narratives that have long portrayed Russia as a dominant regional power and Ukraine as lacking the cohesion or

capability to mount significant resistance. Such narratives, perpetuated through state media and elite discourse, created an echo chamber that marginalised dissenting views and fostered an environment where optimistic assumptions prevailed. Structurally, Russia's initial military superiority and its previous experiences of limited Western intervention in conflicts such as Georgia and Crimea further emboldened this bias, leading to the expectation of a rapid victory with minimal repercussions (Kumar, 2023; Johnson, 2023). However, the unexpectedly robust Ukrainian resistance and the swift, coordinated response from Western states in the form of sanctions and military aid forced Russian strategists into a reactive posture, illustrating how cognitive and cultural filters can distort the interpretation of structural incentives and constraints. The interplay of these factors demonstrates that strategic miscalculations are rarely the product of a single dimension; rather, they emerge from the dynamic interaction of psychological predispositions, cultural context, and material realities.

On the Ukrainian side, cognitive biases have also played a critical role in shaping strategic decisions, particularly through the lens of loss aversion. Ukrainian leaders and the public have exhibited a strong reluctance to consider territorial concessions in regions such as Crimea and the Donbas, even when faced with severe military and humanitarian pressures (D'Anieri, 2019). This aversion is deeply rooted in collective memory and national narratives that emphasise sovereignty, historical victimhood, and the existential threat posed by Russian aggression. The psychological cost of perceived loss is magnified by these narratives, making compromise politically perilous and psychologically intolerable for many Ukrainians. Moreover, both sides have been influenced by optimism bias in their adoption of new technologies, such as drones and cyber warfare capabilities, often overestimating their transformative impact and making operational decisions that have not always delivered the expected results (Drezner, 2021). These patterns of decision-making underscore the limitations of traditional rational actor models in international relations, as they fail to account for the powerful influence of cognitive and cultural factors. Explicit analysis of how biases like overconfidence and loss aversion interact with structural pressures and cultural narratives demonstrates the necessity of integrating psychological and ideational dimensions into the study of strategic behaviour in contemporary conflicts (D'Anieri, 2019; Gisel et al., 2020; (Zhou & Chen, 2023).

## Discussion: Implications for Offensive Realist Theory

A critical examination of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict through the lens of cognitive-cultural offensive realism reveals significant shortcomings in traditional offensive realism and demonstrates the value of a more nuanced theoretical approach. Conventional offensive realism, rooted in the structural logic of anarchy and material power, posits that great powers act rationally to maximise security and influence in a competitive international system (Mearsheimer, 2014; (Waltz, 2008). However, the empirical evidence from this study shows that such a framework cannot fully account for the timing, intensity, and persistence of Russian actions in Ukraine. For example, the annexation of Crimea and the escalation of conflict in 2022 were shaped by shifts in the balance of power and by deep-seated cultural narratives and cognitive biases within Russian leadership, such as overconfidence and loss aversion (Trantidis, 2024); (Zhou & Chen, 2023). These findings challenge the rational actor assumption central to classical realism, highlighting the necessity of a framework that systematically incorporates psychological and ideational factors alongside structural incentives.

The cognitive-cultural offensive realism framework advances international relations theory through the explicit integration of structural, cognitive, and cultural variables. This approach extends offensive realism by recognising that state behaviour is not solely a function of material capabilities or security dilemmas, but is also shaped by leaders' perceptions, collective memories, and national myths (Schmidt & Wight, 2023); (Xin & Zhang, 2023). Empirical analysis demonstrates that cognitive biases, such as overconfidence in military strength or loss aversion regarding territorial concessions, often lead to strategic miscalculations that deviate from rationalist predictions (Berebon, 2023); D'Anieri, 2019). Cultural narratives, including the ideology of 'Russkiy Mir' or the framing of NATO as an existential threat, provide powerful justifications for aggressive policies and influence how threats are perceived and acted upon (ANTONY, 2023); Maitra, 2024). The framework's analytical components: structural incentives, cognitive biases, cultural narratives, and strategic calculations, interact to produce outcomes that pure structural models cannot predict (see Table 4). Systematic analysis of these interactions reveals a richer and more explanatory account of state behaviour in contemporary conflicts.

**Table 4***Cognitive-Cultural Offensive Realism Framework*

Component	Description	Examples
Structural Incentives	Traditional offensive realist considerations focusing on power distribution and security dilemmas	Power distribution among great powers Security dilemmas from military buildups
Cognitive Biases	Psychological factors distorting perceptions of risk and opportunity, shaping threat assessment	Overconfidence in military strength Loss aversion leading to aggressive postures
Cultural Narratives	Historical and ideational factors shaping state identity and interests, influencing the interpretation of events	National myths Collective memories Ideologies such as 'Russkiy Mir'
Strategic Calculations	The integration of structural, cognitive, and cultural factors informing decision-making processes	Decisions influenced by power dynamics Psychological perceptions Cultural heritage

Source: Author's own contributions

In practical terms, the cognitive-cultural framework has significant implications for policy and future research. Practitioners benefit from understanding the interplay of structural, psychological, and cultural factors when designing diplomatic, military, and economic strategies. Policies focused solely on material power or deterrence may fail if they do not also engage with the narratives and biases driving adversary behaviour (Fleury, 2023; Johnson, 2023). Recognising the limits of sanctions or military aid, without corresponding information and cultural engagement, helps avoid unintended escalation or policy failure. The framework underscores the importance of perception management and narrative shaping as tools of statecraft, especially in conflicts where identity and historical memory are central.

Despite its strengths, the cognitive-cultural offensive realism framework is not without limitations. Detailed, context-specific analysis of leadership psychology and cultural discourse is required, which may not always be available or easily operationalised. There is a risk of overemphasising ideational factors at

the expense of material realities, or of retrospective bias in attributing outcomes to cognitive or cultural causes (ARIBA, 2023); Bahinskyi & Zaiets, 2023). Future research should refine the operationalisation of cognitive and cultural variables, test the framework across diverse cases beyond the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and explore how these factors interact with emerging challenges such as technological change and non-state actors (Schmidt & Wight, 2023);(Zhou & Chen, 2023). Addressing these limitations will further strengthen the explanatory power and practical relevance of this integrative approach to international relations.

## Limitations

This study's reliance on a single case, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, naturally limits the generalisability of its findings to other contexts or conflicts. To address this, the research design included a thorough comparison with relevant literature on similar conflicts, highlighting unique and common dynamics to inform broader applicability. The analysis draws primarily on publicly available documents, official statements, and secondary literature, which may not fully capture the nuances of behind-the-scenes decision-making or the perspectives of key actors who remain inaccessible. To mitigate this, the study systematically cross-referenced multiple independent sources and prioritised triangulation to enhance the reliability of interpretations. The integration of cognitive and cultural factors, while offering a richer explanation of state behaviour, also introduces challenges in operationalising and measuring these variables with precision. In response, the study adopted transparent coding criteria and provided detailed explanations of how key concepts were identified and analysed. Interpretations of cultural narratives and psychological biases are inherently subjective and may reflect the author's analytical lens as much as the realities on the ground. To counter this, the analysis was continually checked against alternative perspectives in the literature and subjected to peer feedback to reduce interpretive bias. Moreover, the absence of primary data collection, such as elite interviews or fieldwork, means that the study cannot directly verify the internal deliberations or intentions of policymakers. As a compensatory measure, the research relied on published memoirs, speeches, and expert analyses to approximate internal viewpoints where possible. Finally, the dynamic and evolving nature of the conflict means that some conclusions may be overtaken by subsequent developments, and the framework's applicability to future or different cases remains to be tested through comparative or longitudinal research. To address this, the study documents its temporal boundaries and encourages future research to update and expand upon these findings as new data emerges.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has advanced understanding of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict through the application of cognitive-cultural offensive realism, a framework that integrates structural incentives, psychological biases, and cultural narratives to explain state behaviour. The findings demonstrate that while traditional offensive realism sheds light on the importance of power dynamics and security dilemmas, it does not fully capture how historical myths, collective memories, and cognitive distortions shape foreign policy outcomes. Analysis of key events, such as the annexation of Crimea and the escalation in 2022, reveals how strategic decisions are often driven as much by perceived identity and psychological framing as by calculations of material interest. The study highlights the limitations of rational actor models, showing that strategic miscalculations frequently arise from the interplay of overconfidence, loss aversion, and culturally

embedded narratives. This approach clarifies the drivers of Russian behaviour in Ukraine and offers a broader lens for examining great power competition in the contemporary era.

Theoretical contributions of this research include the development of an integrated analytical framework that moves beyond materialist explanations and incorporates the roles of perception, identity, and culture in international relations. The cognitive-cultural offensive realism model provides a template for future studies seeking to understand complex state behaviour in similarly multifaceted conflicts. On a practical level, the research suggests that effective policy responses require more than military deterrence or economic sanctions. Policymakers benefit from recognising how adversaries' perceptions, cultural narratives, and psychological biases inform their strategic choices. Addressing these factors can improve diplomatic engagement, crisis management, and the design of information campaigns. While the single-case focus and challenges in measuring psychological and cultural variables present limitations, the study's findings encourage further empirical testing and methodological innovation. Future research should explore the applicability of this framework to other conflicts, develop quantitative tools for assessing cultural influence, and foster interdisciplinary collaboration among political scientists, psychologists, and cultural theorists.

Several recommendations emerge from this analysis for both practitioners and scholars:

- Strategic planning should routinely incorporate cultural and psychological analysis alongside traditional assessments of power and capability.
- Interdisciplinary research teams, drawing on expertise in international relations, psychology, and cultural studies, are essential for capturing the full complexity of state behaviour.
- Investment in advanced game-theoretical models that account for cognitive and cultural variables will enhance scenario planning and policy forecasting.
- Comparative studies applying the cognitive-cultural framework to other regional and global conflicts will help refine and validate its utility.
- The development of quantitative metrics for evaluating the impact of cultural narratives on foreign policy will support more rigorous analysis and evidence-based decision-making.
- Diplomatic training programmes should integrate cognitive science methodologies to better prepare negotiators for the psychological and cultural dimensions of international engagement.
- Ongoing scholarly debate and peer review will be crucial for refining the cognitive-cultural offensive realism framework and ensuring its relevance in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

The research presented here underscores the necessity of moving beyond narrow structural explanations and embracing a more holistic understanding of international relations. Recognising the interplay of power, perception, and culture deepens scholarly insight and equips policymakers to navigate the complexities of contemporary global politics with greater sophistication and effectiveness.

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The data that support the findings of this study are derived from publicly accessible documents and sources, which can be provided for verification and further analysis upon reasonable request. This research did not involve the collection of original data, as it is based solely on secondary data sources. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent are not applicable. Any limitations related to data sharing due to ethical, privacy, or security concerns will be clearly stated upon request.

#### Author Contributions

The author is solely responsible for the conception, research, writing, and overall development of this article. All aspects of the study, including the literature review, methodology, analysis, and conclusions, were conducted independently by the author.

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