RESEARCH ARTICLE

Plea for a Relationalist Operationalization of the Realist Structure

Lionel P. Fatton

Department of International Relations, Webster University - Geneva Campus, Bellevue, Geneva, 1293, Switzerland

https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17996.2

Abstract

The polarized realist debate over the causes of the Russia-Ukraine war and Moscow's foreign security policy towards its periphery in general exposes the shortcomings of the Waltzian international structure. They include the analytical imprecision inherent to the appraisal of the distribution of capabilities and the capacity to comprehend only a limited number of macro-behaviors. These shortcomings have incited certain scholars to return to classical realism or to introduce unit-level factors within neoclassical realist constructs. Although these endeavors have merits, they distract scholarly attention from questioning our comprehension of the structure. To refine the systemic approach, I argue for a relationalist operationalization of the structure that mobilizes the literature on international hierarchies.

Relationalism, as an analytical orientation, directs the inquiry into the transactions and practices that typify relationships between countries. The literature on international hierarchies, for its part, is suitable to comprehend relations of domination and subordination and helps formulate working hypotheses. These hypotheses, tested on the Russia-Ukraine relationship from the mid-2000s to the 2022 conflict, posit that a superordinate asserts influence on a subordinate through the provision of system services, like economic support and security commitments. The failure to satisfy the subordinate's expectations leads the latter to undertake a rapprochement with extra-regional actors, a move that invites increasingly coercive measures by the superordinate to retain the subordinate under its yoke. The relationalist operationalization helps explore the means used by Moscow to assert influence on Kyiv and sheds a new light on the Russia-Ukraine case. It highlights Russia's inability to act as a legitimate superordinate and depicts the 2022 invasion as a sign of weakness. It also emphasizes Ukraine's agency. Western countries' eastward expansion is reflective of the westward movements of Eastern European countries attracted by better system services. Therefore, Western countries should not be blamed for their eastward expansion but for having failed to deter Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords

realism, relationalism, international structure, international hierarchies, Ukraine, Russia, NATO

Corresponding author: Lionel P. Fatton (lionel.fatton@sciencespo.fr)

Author roles: Fatton LP: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This research was supported by Research Grant #SU24-03 from Webster University – Geneva Campus.
The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

How to cite this article: Fatton LP. **Plea for a Relationalist Operationalization of the Realist Structure [version 2; peer review: 2 approved, 2 not approved]** Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations 2025, **5**:28
https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17996.2

First published: 22 Sep 2025, **5**:28 https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17996.1

Introduction

The debate among realist scholars over the causes of the Russia-Ukraine war and Moscow's foreign security policy towards its periphery in general exposes the shortcomings of the Waltzian international structure. A first line of reasoning in structural realism-inspired explanations emphasizes the proactive and offensive stance of Russia. Conversely, the second line of reasoning assumes its reactive and defensive stance. These conflicting assessments have incited certain scholars to return to classical realism or to correct the flaws of system-level approaches with the inclusion of unit-level variables within neoclassical realist constructs. Although these endeavors have merits, they distract scholarly attention from questioning seriously the relevance of our comprehension of the international structure. Instead of seeking to improve our knowledge of the latter, much of the realist literature focuses on unit-level factors or two-level theoretical constructs that rely on outdated Waltzian premises.

By treating relations as analytically prior to the structure, relationalism holds the prospect of remedying the deficient operationalization of the realist structure. Relationalism locates the source of countries' behaviors in relationships and directs the inquiry into the transactions and practices that typify exchange relationships. Anarchy and the material position of countries in the international system do not dictate their behaviors, patterns of transactions do. Besides macro-behaviors such as balancing and bandwagoning, relationalism helps refine our comprehension of countries' transactional behaviors. As such, a relationalist perspective holds more causal power than the static and ahistorical Waltzian structure.

I mobilize the literature on international hierarchies to operationalize the realist structure through relationalism. In addition to its compatibility with relationalism, this literature is particularly suitable to comprehend relations of domination and subordination, like the one between Russia and Ukraine. I adopt a deductive, exploratory approach and extract working hypotheses from the literature, the latter providing a solid basis on which to engage in a priori theorizing.1 I test the hypotheses on the Russia-Ukraine relationship from the mid- 2000s to the outbreak of the 2022 war. The Russia-Ukraine case serves as the testing ground for a plausibility probe. The main purpose is to show that the potential validity of the relationalist operationalization of the international structure in explaining the dynamics between a superordinate – or dominant power – and its subordinate is high enough to warrant further research.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section provides an overview of the realist literature on Russia-Ukraine relations and discusses the shortcomings of the Waltzian structure before turning to the relationalist operationalization of the structure. Section two tests working hypotheses on the Russia-Ukraine relationship to determine the potential validity of the relationalist operationalization. The article concludes with observations on this potential validity and its consequences for the realist agenda.

Realism, relationalism and the Russia-Ukraine war

This section begins by showing that the conflicting assessments made by realist scholars of the causes of the Russia-Ukraine war and Moscow's foreign security policy towards its periphery in general expose the shortcomings of the Waltzian structure. The section subsequently turns to the relationalist operationalization of the structure and formulates the working hypotheses later tested on the Russia-Ukraine case.

Shortcomings of the Waltzian international structure

The Waltzian structure is dual.[2] The deep structure refers to the principle of anarchy, namely the absence of a higher ruling body capable of regulating international relations. This principle implies countries' overriding interest for security because they evolve in a dangerous environment characterized by prevalent uncertainty about others' intentions.[3] The distributional structure depicts the distribution of capabilities – military and economic – among countries. Since the deep structure is constant, the distribution of capabilities constitutes the causal variable of Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory. To ensure their security, countries adapt to the power of others and react to changes in capabilities by balancing and bandwagoning.[4] And because Waltz focuses on great powers, polarity – the number of such actors in a given international system – "does almost all the causal work."[5]

[1] Mattia Casula, Nandhini Rangarajan and Patricia Shields. "The potential of working hypotheses for deductive exploratory research." *Quality & Quantity* 55 (2020): 1703–25.

[2] Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 79.

[3] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 88–89.

[4] *Ibid*., 126.

[5] Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38.

The conflicting assessments made by realist scholars of the causes of the Russia-Ukraine war and Moscow's foreign security policy towards its periphery in general expose the shortcomings of the Waltzian structure. Even though most scholars do not adopt a purely system-level – or structural realist – line of reasoning due to these shortcomings, two systemic approaches can be extrapolated from their works. The first approach posits that the economic and military revival of Russia that began in the mid-2000s provided the Kremlin with the opportunity to reassert its influence on its periphery.[6] Rising relatively to countries positioned in the post-Soviet space, Russia sought to revamp the regional environment and to reclaim the great power status it lost following the collapse of the Soviet Union.[7] Russia is regarded as having proactively reshaped its environment and, in doing so, as having challenged the Western-led order.[8] From this standpoint, the invasion of Ukraine was an attempt by Moscow to enlarge its sphere of influence westward amid a favorable distribution of capabilities.[9] This first line of reasoning falls broadly into the offensive realist perspective by understanding the distributional structure as an enabling factor to Russia's growingly coercive policy.[10] The second approach assumes the reactive stance of Russia and embraces a defensive realist viewpoint. It is argued that the eastward expansion of a powerful North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the prospect of countries like Georgia and Ukraine joining the Western alliance constituted an existential threat to Russia.[11] Indeed, Stephen Walt asserts that Western countries overlooked the fundamental realist premise that great powers are highly sensitive to their security environment, and this especially in their immediate neighborhood.[12] The Russian 2008 military operations in Georgia and the 2014 and 2022 offensives against Ukraine aimed at thwarting the enlargement of the Western sphere of influence through preventive actions.[13] This second line of reasoning focuses primarily on the threat posed to Russia's security by the overwhelming strength and potential expansion eastward of NATO, and thus a disadvantageous distribution of capabilities.

These conflicting assessments expose several shortcomings of the Waltzian structure. First, the appraisal of the distribution of capabilities cannot but result in analytical imprecision because, in addition to perennial issues in conceptualizing and measuring power, the consequential decision of which actors to include in the distributional structure is left to the discretion of the researcher. Whether the structure includes Russia and Ukraine or Russia and NATO countries changes completely the evaluation of its effects. Moreover, the balance of power approach is inherently dyadic and becomes difficult to handle when three or more actors are considered. The operationalization of the distribution of capabilities between Russia, Ukraine and NATO countries is overwhelmingly complex, without mentioning the possible inclusion in the equation of post-Soviet states like Belorussia.

Second, not only is polarity of limited use to investigate relationships between great powers and second and third-tier countries, but the distribution of capabilities also helps comprehend only a limited number of macro-behavioral patterns, like balancing and bandwagoning. As such, realists have had to rely on other tools to explain micro-decisions, those related to the use of armed forces for instance. These include structural modifiers, which "pull and push states in clearer ways than the deep and distributional structure do."[14] Other scholars have instilled dynamism into the inherently static Waltzian distribution of capabilities by focusing on power shifts.[15] Lastly, neoclassical realists have introduced unit-level factors as intervening variables between the systemic stimuli that emanate from the distributional structure and foreign policy outcomes.[16] As regards the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, scholars have predominantly turned to classical realism,

[6] Jeffrey Mankoff. "Russia and the West: Taking the Longer View." *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2007): 123–35; Jeronim Perovic. "Introduction: Russian Energy Power, Domestic and International Dimensions." In *Russian Energy Power and Foreign Relations*, ed. Jeronim Perovic, Robert W. Orttung and Andreas Wenger (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009). 1–20.

[7] Hans Mouritzen and Anders Wivel, *Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2012), 81–96; Bertil Nygren. *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy Toward the CIS Countries* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

[8] Trine Flockhard and Elena A. Korosteleva. "War in Ukraine: Putin and the multi-order world." *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (2022): 466–81; Alexander Korolex. "Theories of Non-Balancing and Russia's Foreign Policy." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 6 (2018): 887–912.

[9] Murat Guneylioglu. "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: The Implications for the American Hegemony." *Cogito - Multidisciplinary Research Journal* 14, no. 3 (2022): 85–102.

[10] Layla Dawood and Eugenio Diniz. "The Realist debate in the context of the War in Ukraine: balancing dynamics, international change and strategic calculus." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 67, no. 1 (2024).

[11] John J. Mearsheimer. "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War." *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 21 (2022): 12–27; John J. Mearsheimer. "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77–89.

[12] Stephen M. Walt. "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis." *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2022. https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/19/ukraine-russia-nato-crisis-liberal-illusions/ (accessed July 30, 2025).

[13] Barry R. Posen. "Putin's Preventive War: The 2022 Invasion of Ukraine." *International Security* 49, no. 3 (2025): 7–49.

[14] Michiel Foulon and Gustav Meibauer, "How cyberspace affects international relations: The promise of structural modifiers," *Contemporary Security Policy* 45, no. 3 (2024): 432.

[15] For example: Douglas Lemke. "The Continuation of History: Power Transition Theory and the End of the Cold War." *Journal of Peace Research* 34, no. 1 (1997): 23–36.

[16] For example: Gideon Rose. "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72.

neoclassical realism and power shifts.[17] The assessments of those relying on power shifts remain conflicting because the perspective logically inherits many of the shortcomings of the Waltzian understanding of the structure. Classical realists – who deemphasize the importance of the structure – and neoclassical realists – who seek to correct the flaws of structural realism by taking unit-level factors into account – recognize the shortcomings of Waltzian premises but do not tackle the problem head-on. I argue that the realist agenda must more seriously question these premises, and that relationalism holds the prospect of remedying the deficient operationalization of the international structure.

A last observation about the Waltzian structure is worth making. Although Waltz posits that "domestic systems are centralized and hierarchic" while "international systems are decentralized and anarchic," anarchy does not signify the absence of hierarchy.[18] Assuming a lack of hierarchy does not only contradict his own ranked differentiation among actors – great powers dominate a material stratification of countries – it also runs against the very fact that interactions between different socio-political entities, from tribes to nation-states, have often been shaped by relations of domination and subordination. The literature on international hierarchies, which I mobilize to operationalize the realist structure through relationalism, is particularly suitable to comprehend such relations.

Relationalist operationalization of the international structure

Relationalism is an analytical orientation that treats relations as prior to units, countries for example. It posits that some of the socially and politically pertinent characteristics of units – identity, interests, priorities – are the products of past and present interactions.[19] In other words, relationalism adopts an "ontology of relations" rather than an "ontology of things" and prioritizes process over substance.[20] Consequently, relations are also analytically prior to structures. More precisely, relationalism considers structures as relatively stable, although inherently dynamic, patterns of transactions between units.[21] Therefore, these patterns of transactions are the focal point of inquiry. Units are bound by networks of exchange relationships that influence their behaviors. The relationalist operationalization of the international structure thus differs from the Waltzian perspective in explaining countries' behaviors by the transactions and practices that characterize exchange relationships, not by the material position of countries in the system. This focus on patterns of transactions instills dynamism into the static Waltzian structure. Moreover, relationalism easily moves past the dyadic bias of the balance of power by investigating networks of exchange relationships. Lastly, the relationalist perspective holds more causal power than the Waltzian distribution of capabilities because, beyond macro-behaviors like balancing and bandwagoning, it helps comprehend countries' transactional behaviors.

The fact that the relationalist operationalization goes beyond the distributional structure does not mean that the material structure has no impact on countries. Indeed, the first step in the operationalization is to identify the relationships of interest and to determine their nature. As regards the latter, relationships can be characterized by domination and subordination or parity, for example. Therefore, although the material position of countries in the international system does not have a direct impact on their behaviors, it shapes their relationships. The second step entails the analysis of the transactions and practices that typify the exchange relationships to explain the transactional behaviors of units. These transactions and practices can be symbolic, implying the exchange of rhetorical and other ideational elements, or non-symbolic, involving the exchange of material goods and services.

Relationalism being an analytical orientation, a proper operationalization of the realist structure requires the support of a mature theoretical framework. I mobilize the literature on international hierarchies because it is particularly suitable to investigate the transactions and practices that typify exchange relationships and to comprehend relations of domination and subordination, like the one between Russia and Ukraine. Indeed, international hierarchies are defined broadly as systems in which actors are organized into vertical relations of super- and subordination.[22] Before digging into the literature on these hierarchies, the national interests of countries must be considered because they condition how units navigate exchange relationships.

As the objective is here to operationalize the realist structure, I stick to the anarchic assumption that countries prioritize their security. When the relationship is characterized by domination and subordination, the fulfillment of the national interests of the superordinate – or dominant power – implies the maintenance of influence on the foreign policy of subordinates.[23] Because the superordinate prioritizes its security, it seeks to prevent subordinates – especially those in its periphery – from

[17] For example: Lauro Borges, Nicholas Ross Smith and Mahammad Eslami. "State capacity, military modernisation, and balancing: A conditional model of state capacity neoclassical realism." *Review of International Studies* (2025); Ryuta Ito. "Hubris balancing: classical realism, self-deception and Putin's war against Ukraine." *International Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2023): 2037–55; Bradley C. Smith. "Commitment problems and Russia's invasion of Ukraine." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 41, no. 5 (2024): 494–513.

[18] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 88.

[19] Mustafa Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (1997): 287.

[20] Astrid H.M. Nordin *et al*., "Towards global relational theorizing: a dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on relationalism," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (2019): 572.

[21] Daniel Nexon, "Relationalism and New Systems Theory," in *New Systems Theories of World Politics*, ed. Mathias Albert, Lars-Erik Cederman and Alexander Wendt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 101.

[22] Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol. "Hierarchies in World Politics." *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (2016): 623–54.

[23] John M. Schuessler, Joshua Shifrinson and David Blagden, "Revisiting Insularity and Expansion: A Theory Note," *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 4 (2023): 1307.

undertaking an economic, political and/or security rapprochement with threatening extra-regional actors, thereby creating a belt of *aligned buffers*. While buffers are defined as "regions or zones situated between conflicting spheres of influence and whose primary function is to separate the conflicting sides and thus reduce the likelihood of physical (military) contact," aligned buffers denote countries fulfilling the same function while being aligned with one of the competing sides.[24] As such, subordinates prevent extra-regional actors from projecting military power near the superordinate's territory.

The literature on international hierarchies helps explore the transactions and practices that typify an exchange relationship characterized by domination and subordination. The "agentic-contractual" approach understands hierarchies as emanating from a bargained solution to the problem of international (dis)order.[25] In line with the political contractualism of Jean Bodin, John Locke and others, self-interested and purposeful countries enter an explicit or implicit contract by which subordinates accept a limitation of their freedom in exchange for what John Ikenberry conceptualizes as "system services."[26] These services are provided by the country that dominates the international hierarchy, the superordinate. In view of historical research, two stand out: economic and security services.[27] Economic services can take different forms such as financial support, trade agreements, official development assistance and state-directed investments while security services can materialize in alliances, collective security mechanisms, political commitments, arms transfers and so on. In exchange, subordinates align with the superordinate's preferences at the expense of their relationships with extra-regional actors. As long as the value of system services outweighs the costs subordinates incur in restricting their freedom, the superordinate is regarded as a legitimate authority and the hierarchy it dominates as authoritative.[28] In other words, the superordinate must deliver on its promises and satisfy the expectations of subordinates to maintain its performance legitimacy and consequently its domination over them. The maintenance of an international hierarchy thus entails constant adaptation of system services and periodic renegotiation of the contract to accommodate the evolving interests of the countries involved. The transactional behaviors of countries revolve around this adaptation of system services and alignment with the superordinate's preferences.

Three working hypotheses can be extracted from the relationalist operationalization of the international structure.

WH1: The superordinate asserts influence on a subordinate's foreign policy through the provision of system services.

Because the subordinate's interests change over time, services need to be constantly adapted and the contract periodically renegotiated. The failure by the superordinate to satisfy the expectations of a subordinate amounts to a breach of the contract and may incite the latter to renege on its own commitment, namely to refrain from economic, political and/or security rapprochement with extra-regional actors. Hence the second working hypothesis.

WH2: A subordinate attempts to depart from the superordinate's influence when system services do not keep pace with its evolving interests.

The likelihood of this happening is expected to be particularly high when an alternative offers the prospect of better system services. In case a subordinate threatens defection by moving towards extra-regional actors, the superordinate has three broad options. First, it can upgrade system services with the objective of finding a modus vivendi within the framework of an updated contract. Economic coercion – the second option – is chosen if upgraded services are ineffective in retaining the subordinate under the yoke of the superordinate. Economic pressure is assumed to be the preferred means of coercion because of being relatively risk- and cost-free for the superordinate. Moreover, the use of this tool is akin to a negotiating tactic aimed at pressuring the subordinate into respecting its contractual commitments. Inversely, military coercion – the third option – destroys the contractual relationship and is therefore used as a last resort. Overall, coercion, and especially military coercion, is expected to be used only when the subordinate takes concrete steps towards departing from the superordinate's influence.[29] The third working hypothesis thus reads:

WH3: The further a subordinate departs from the superordinate's influence, the more coercive the means used by the superordinate to retain it under its yoke.

Figure 1 summarizes visually the working hypotheses in the context of the Russia-Ukraine case.

This visualization depicts the three working hypotheses, where the superordinate asserts influence on a subordinate's foreign policy through the provision of system services. The failure to satisfy the subordinate's expectations incites the latter to undertake an economic, political and/or security rapprochement with extra-regional actors, a move that invites increasingly coercive measures by the superordinate. The visualization includes the timeline of the Russia-Ukraine relationship.

[24] John Chay and Thomas E. Ross, "Introduction," in *Buffer States in World Politics*, ed. John Chay and Thomas E. Ross (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

[25] Ayşe Zarakol, "Theorising Hierarchies: An Introduction," in *Hierarchies in World Politics*, ed. Ayşe Zarakol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2017), 7.

[26] G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 6.

[27] Lucian M. Ashworth. "Realism and the spirit of 1919: Halford Mackinder, geopolitics and the reality of the League of Nations." *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (2011): 279–301; Lloyd C. Gardner. *Spheres of Influence: The Great Powers Partition of Europe, from Munich to Yalta* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 1993).

[28] David A. Lake, "Regional hierarchy: authority and local international order," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 38.

[29] Robert W. Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (1983): 164.

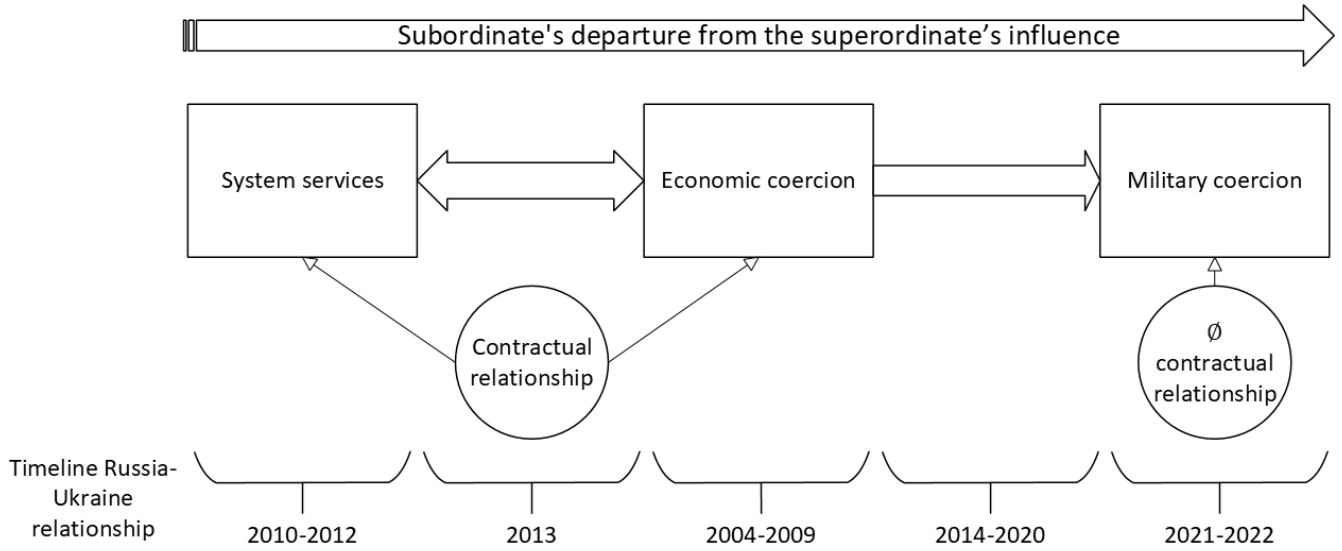

Figure 1. Working hypotheses – legend.

Russia-Ukraine relationship from the mid-2000s to 2022

This section sheds light on the Russia-Ukraine relationship through the prism of the relationalist operationalization of the international structure and the working hypotheses formulated above. The case study is illustrative in nature and does not seek to explain the case fully. In this regard, I do not deny the impact individual, domestic and ideational factors have had on the relationship but aim at refining the systemic approach. The section is divided into two parts. The first examines the laborious reassertion of Russia's influence on Ukraine between 2004 and 2013. The second explains Ukraine's departure from Russia's influence from 2014 to the outbreak of the 2022 war and Moscow's reactions to this westward move. Throughout the period under review, the exchange relationships of interest were those between Russia, Ukraine and Western countries. Regarding the nature of these relationships, Ukraine was materially subordinated – economically and militarily – to both Russia and Western countries.

Reassertion of Russia's influence on Ukraine, 2004–2013

The investigation begins in the mid-2000s because, for a decade and a half after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin was not in a position to exert the level of influence on Kyiv's foreign policy necessary to pretend to the status of superordinate. Indeed, the weakness of the Russian state prevented the country from providing Ukraine with relevant system services.[30] The nature of the exchange relationship between the two countries was thus different from the one this article focuses on, namely a relationship characterized by domination and subordination.

The Russian state power strengthened during the first half of the 2000s, enabling the Kremlin to reassert its influence on its periphery.[31] The gradual modernization of the Russian armed forces bolstered Moscow's ability to deliver security services. This was reflected by the creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2002 as well as arms transfers at discounted prices to countries deemed friendly to Moscow. Concurrently, financial support, state-directed investments and the acquisition of controlling stakes by Russian companies in the energy infrastructures of neighboring countries helped the Kremlin improve the quality of its economic services.[32] Russia was thus capable of reclaiming its status of superordinate and, consequently, of pushing countries in the post-Soviet space into subordinate positions. Moscow's resolve to exercise greater influence on subordinates' foreign policy implied more conditionality on the latter's interactions with extra-regional actors. In other words, contracts binding these countries together needed to be renegotiated. This triggered resistance from some subordinates, particularly those that had been looking for alternative sources of system services during the period of Russia's state weakness. Moscow had to use economic coercion to prevent these subordinates from drifting further away while pressuring them into entering a stable contractual relationship. Georgia is a case in point; Ukraine is another.

In the run-up to the 2004 elections, opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko made explicit his ambition to move Ukraine closer to the European Union (EU) and the United States (US). Once in power, the Yushchenko government entered an

[30] Elias Götz, "Taking the Longer View: A Neoclassical Realist Account of Russia's Neighbourhood Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (2022): 1743.

[31] Gerald M. Easter, "Revenue Imperatives: State over Market in Postcommunist Russia," in *The Political Economy of Russia*, ed. Neil Robinson (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 40–44.

[32] Andrei P. Tsygankov. "If not by Tanks, then by Banks? The Role of Soft Power in Putin's Foreign Policy." *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 7 (2006): 1079–99.

Intensified Dialogue on Membership with NATO and announced that the 1997 agreement providing the Russian Black Sea Fleet access to facilities in Crimea would not be renewed beyond 2017. Moscow responded with economic coercion to thwart Ukraine's rapprochement with the West and ideally pressure Kyiv into a modus vivendi within the framework of a contractual relationship. In March 2005, a serious dispute erupted between Gazprom and Naftogaz over the latter's outstanding debts and the price of natural gas transiting through the Ukrainian territory. After months of tense discussions and Gazprom's decision in early January 2006 to cut off gas supply to Ukraine, a five-year deal put an end to the dispute. Two years later, Gazprom reduced gas deliveries to push Naftogaz to repay a $1.5 billion debt. Despite a temporary settlement soon found between the heads of the two companies, Gazprom once again turned off supply in January 2009 because of another debt feud, pressuring Naftogaz into accepting a ten-year agreement on gas deliveries and transit.

Although economic considerations were central to the 2005–06 and 2008–09 gas crises, the geopolitical motives of the Kremlin were just as important. The Russian state had taken control of Gazprom during the first half of the 2000s and was thus in a position to shape the latter's decisions vis-à-vis Ukraine.[33] The 2005–06 crisis started two months after pro-Western Yushchenko assumed presidency while, less than a year earlier, Gazprom, Moscow and Kyiv – then under Leonid Kuchma's leadership – had agreed to a settlement of the debts owned by Naftogaz. According to Tatiana Mitrova, "after 15 years of supplying Ukraine with cheap Russian gas, Gazprom and the Russian government decided that they would no longer be prepared to provide gas at subsidized prices."[34] The gas crises reflected Russia's shift to economic coercion. Indeed, the timing of the two gas cut-offs – January – and the deleterious impact of energy price hikes on the Ukrainian economy betrayed Moscow's intention to pressure, if not destabilize, the Yushchenko government.[35] The Russian approach proved effective: economic coercion was instrumental in preventing Kyiv from taking decisive steps in its rapprochement with the West.

Pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych assumed presidency in early 2010, providing the Kremlin with the opportunity to assert its influence through the delivery of system services to a government more receptive to the idea of a contractual relationship with Russia. Moscow swiftly upgraded its services in search of a modus vivendi. In April 2010, only two months after Yanukovych took over the presidency, the two countries signed the Kharkiv Pact. Russia wrote off parts of Ukraine's energy debt and reduced by 30 percentage points the cost of gas sold to the latter in exchange for a twenty-five-year extension of the lease of Crimean facilities for the Black Sea Fleet. Moscow's intent to reach a conclusion in the contract negotiations was reflected one month later when President Dmitry Medvedev declared that "no one expects that we will immediately resolve all problems, but what's most important is not to lower the pressure, not to reduce our rate of delivery."[36] In June, the Ukrainian parliament approved a bill that closed the door to NATO membership. This decision and others that pulled Ukraine away from the transatlantic alliance and the West in general invited enhanced economic services. Although Kyiv had not ratified the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) charter, it signed the CIS Free Trade Area in October 2011, an instrument dedicated to revitalizing Russia's trade ties with several countries in its periphery.

Russia had thus regained influence on Ukraine's foreign policy through the provision of system services. The contractual relationship remained fragile, however, and economic services soon proved inadequate to help Kyiv navigate the fallout of the global financial crisis. From 2012 onward, the Ukrainian economy entered a phase of slowdown: its real GDP growth declined from 5.5 percent in 2011 to 0.2 percent in 2012 and 0 percent in 2013.[37] Ukraine was concurrently struggling to repay foreign debt and its foreign exchange reserves shrunk from $32 billion in early 2012 to $20 billion in late 2013.[38] Moscow strove to support its subordinate. For instance, Kyiv applied for observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union in August 2013 and a few months later reached an agreement with Russia according to which the Kremlin would buy $15 billion-worth of Ukrainian government bonds and lower by one-third the cost of gas sold to its subordinate. This was insufficient to satisfy the needs of Kyiv, which had begun to seek better economic services from the West. Even the pro-Russian Yanukovych government started drifting away from Moscow's influence. In March 2012, Ukraine and the EU initialed the Association Agreement (AA) and the related Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Agreement (DCFTA). At first focusing exclusively on upgrading its economic services, Russia returned to coercion in the summer of 2013 as the Vilnius Summit, during which the AA was expected to be signed, was approaching. In August, it placed an embargo on Ukrainian goods. The message was clear: if Kyiv persevered in its rapprochement with Western countries and took concrete steps towards departing from Russia's influence, its access to the Russian market would be restricted.

[33] Marshall I. Goldman, *Petrostate: Putin, Power, and the New Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 104–05.

[34] Tatiana Mitrova, "Gazprom's Perspective on International Markets," *Russian Analytical Digest* 41, no. 8 (2008), 3.

[35] Randall Newnham, "Oil, Carrots, and Sticks: Russia's Resources as a Foreign Policy Tool," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 140–41.

[36] Quoted in: James Sherr, *The Mortgaging of Ukraine's Independence* (London: Chatham House, 2010), 10.

[37] International Monetary Fund. *Real GDP growth - Ukraine*. https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/UKR?zoom=UKR&highlight=UKR (accessed July 30, 2025).

[38] Wojciech Konończuk. "Ukraine withdraws from signing the Association Agreement in Vilnius: The motives and implications." *Centre for Eastern Studies*, November 27, 2013. https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-11-27/ukraine-withdraws-signing-association-agreement-vilnius-motives-and (accessed July 30, 2025).

2013 was thus a year of transition during which Russia used economic coercion to thwart Ukraine's rapprochement with the West while striving to upgrade its economic services. This approach eventually backfired. Yanukovych refused to sign the AA and DCFTA at the Vilnius Summit of November 2013, hoping for the end of Russia's coercion and the procurement of superior economic services from Moscow in return. The decision triggered the mass demonstrations known as Euromaidan and resulted in the removal of Yanukovych from office.

Ukraine's departure from Russia's influence, 2014–2022

Immediately after its formation, the Ukrainian interim government declared its intention to deepen cooperation with Western countries and to sign the AA and DCFTA, something done in March and June 2014, respectively. Ukraine's rapprochement with the West institutionalized not only economically, but also in terms of foreign policy and security affairs. Indeed, Article 7 of the AA stated that "the parties shall intensify their dialogue and cooperation and promote gradual convergence in the area of foreign and security policy, including the Common Security and Defence Policy."[39] In response, Russia not only abandoned the provision of system services as a means of retaining Ukraine under its influence, it also gradually shifted from economic to military coercion.

Moscow reacted swiftly to the announcement by the Ukrainian government of its intention to sign the AA and DCFTA. In late February 2014, Russian forces without insignia seized strategic locations across Crimea and helped initiate a referendum that led to the official annexation of the peninsula by Russia. Although the Kremlin justified the intervention by the need to protect the Russian community in Crimea against Ukrainian ultra-nationalist groups, geopolitical considerations were paramount. Moscow secured control of facilities deemed necessary for its fleet to operate efficiently, thereby preventing Kyiv's economic, political and security rapprochement with Western countries from jeopardizing its military dominance in the Black Sea area.[40] Moreover, the annexation signaled to Kyiv that further steps towards the West would be decisively retaliated against and possibly result in territorial dismemberment. The credibility of this signal was reinforced by the fomentation of unrest in Donbas. In May 2014, pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk declared victories in self-determination referendums. Moscow subsequently helped the two self-proclaimed republics to reorganize their military units and to set up key public institutions. It also provided them with financial and economic assistance and, when Kyiv-backed forces were on the offensive, with military support. Despite the Minsk Agreements of September 2014 and February 2015, the threat of destabilization of Eastern Ukraine remained a sword of Damocles hanging over Kyiv. As Elias Götz observes, "the Kremlin effectively made it clear that it would not allow the insurgency to be defeated, unless Kyiv was ready to change its geopolitical orientation."[41] Consequently, Moscow had not yet given up the hope of recovering influence on Ukraine's foreign policy within the framework of a contractual relationship.

In this regard, important to note is the fact that if the Crimean and Donbas interferences heralded a shift from economic to military coercion, they remained hybrid in nature. In other words, Moscow had not crossed the Rubicon of overt military coercion and continued to pressure Kyiv into respecting its initial contractual commitments. The massive cyberattacks launched by Russia-affiliated hacker groups in 2015, 2016 and 2017 against Ukraine's energy infrastructures and businesses were of the same nature and followed the same logic. They were meant to exacerbate the country's economic vulnerabilities and pressure the government of Petro Poroshenko. The Kremlin also used economic coercion. For instance, the price of gas sold by Gazprom to Ukraine almost doubled between late March and early April 2014 and Vladimir Putin suspended the CIS Free Trade Area in late 2015. Russia also imposed an embargo on certain Ukrainian goods.

This approach made of economic and hybrid military coercion proved counterproductive. Ukraine diversified its energy supplies while the entry into force of the DCFTA in early 2016 as well as financial support from European countries and the US gave Kyiv greater access to Western economic services. Worse from Moscow's perspective, Kyiv, now the subject of hybrid military coercion, sought security services from the West. In December 2014, Ukraine's parliament adopted a law ending the country's non-aligned status and opening the door to NATO and EU memberships. In July 2016, Ukraine and NATO signed a Comprehensive Assistance Package aimed at strengthening the former's capacity to defend itself and at achieving interoperability between Ukrainian forces and the transatlantic alliance by 2020. The number and scope of joint exercises subsequently increased. One year later, another parliamentary decision set as a priority the deepening of cooperation with NATO. The term of Poroshenko in office closed with the February 2019 revision of Ukraine's constitution, which redirected its foreign policy towards seeking "full membership" in NATO and the EU.[42]

Despite promises made during his election campaign to revive the Minsk II process, which would have implied reengaging Russia, Volodymyr Zelenskyy reversed course once in power and pushed for expanding the partnership with NATO. The latter reciprocated by recognizing Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner in June 2020, a few months before Kyiv's adoption of a new national security strategy that sought full membership in NATO. The Kremlin, having lost faith

[39] Ukraine Government Portal. *Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine*. https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/yevropejska-integraciya/ugoda-pro-asociacyu (accessed July 30, 2025).

[40] Igor Delanoe, "After the Crimean Crisis: Towards a Greater Russian Maritime Power in the Black Sea," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14, no. 3 (2014): 374–79.

[41] Götz, "Taking the Longer View," 1753.

[42] High Council of Justice, Ukraine. *Constitution of Ukraine*. https://hcj.gov.ua/sites/default/files/field/file/the_constitution_of_ukraine.pdf (accessed July 30, 2025), Article 85, Clause 5.

in the effectiveness of system services in retaining Ukraine under its yoke and realizing the detrimental ramifications of relying on economic and hybrid military coercion, faced a Cornelian dilemma: Russia could accept Ukraine's ultimate departure from its influence and assume the negative consequences for its national security; or it could resort to overt military coercion, thereby irrevocably destroying the contractual relationship and running the risk of military confrontation with its former subordinate. For individual, domestic and/or ideational reasons that fall outside the scope of this article, Moscow chose the second option.

Russia first deployed some 100,000 soldiers on Ukraine's borders between March and April 2021, a coercive move that triggered discussions between Russian and Western officials. The Kremlin's attempt at convincing its counterparts that Ukraine's rapprochement with the West jeopardized its national security and ought to be paused, if not reversed, failed. On the contrary, NATO subsequently deepened cooperation with Kyiv through joint exercises in the Black Sea and displays of diplomatic support. Russia launched a second round of overt military coercion during the fall. The troops mobilized, which number reached roughly 180,000, were combat-ready. Moreover, while its strategic communication during the spring mobilization remained vague, the Kremlin was now drawing clear red lines. In mid-December 2021, two draft treaties were sent to the US and NATO. The draft addressed to Washington aimed at closing the door to any kind of military cooperation between the US and countries "of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that are not members" of NATO.[43] The draft sent to NATO was even more explicit, requiring its members not to "conduct any military activity on the territory of Ukraine" and to "commit themselves to refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine."[44]

The contractual relationship between Kyiv and Moscow having been destroyed by overt military coercion and the Kremlin having consequently lost influence on its subordinate's foreign policy, Russia was reaching out directly to Washington and its allies to obtain guarantees that they would stop providing security services to Ukraine, thereby preventing NATO from projecting military power near its territory. The response by Western countries, which kept open the possibility for NATO to accept new members, failed to fulfill the Kremlin's conditions. The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine thus constituted the logical outcome of relational dynamics that had led Russia to gradually abandon system services and to adopt increasingly coercive measures in order to retain its neighbor under its influence. It also reflected Moscow's impotence and inability to act as a legitimate superordinate in its relationship with Ukraine, the use of armed forces being, from a relationalist perspective, a sign of weakness.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to determine the potential validity of the relationalist operationalization of the international structure in explaining the dynamics between a superordinate and its subordinate. The investigation did not intend to demonstrate the actual validity of the operationalization. To do so, further research and comparative studies need to be undertaken. This may include examinations of the relationships between Russia and other current and past subordinates and relational dynamics that revolve around other great powers, the US and China for example. This effort is worth undertaking. First because there is reasonable confidence in the validity of the relationalist operationalization, the latter being "derived logically from premises that have previously yielded valid theory in a field," namely those advanced by the literature on international hierarchies.[45] Second, the operationalization sheds a new light on a typical case of relations of domination and subordination. Apart from integrating both the reactive and proactive lines of reasoning of the systemic approach – Russia was proactive towards Ukraine and reactive vis-à-vis the West – it helps explore the different means used by Moscow in its attempts to assert influence on Kyiv's foreign policy. The relationalist operationalization thus goes beyond macro-behavioral patterns like balancing and bandwagoning. It also emphasizes the agency of subordinates. While system-level explanations tend to regard countries like Ukraine as pawn-like entities caught in geopolitical struggles between great powers, the operationalization sides with many area studies scholars in understanding NATO/EU eastward expansion as being reflective of the westward movements of self-interested and purposeful Central and Eastern European countries attracted by better system services.[46] If Russia proved an incompetent superordinate, it is Ukraine that took the decision to depart from its influence. Therefore, NATO and the EU should not be blamed for their eastward expansions. They should rather be criticized for having failed to deter the Russian invasion by sticking to a wait-and-see attitude towards Ukraine's membership.

Moving forward, realist scholars must more seriously question Waltzian structural premises. For instance, instead of relying on structural realist baselines, neoclassical realists could ground their inquiries in the relationalist operationalization of the structure and investigate how unit-level factors impact countries' ability to provide system services. Such endeavors would open new avenues of research and enrich realism by creating synergies with other agendas in the discipline, including the one on international hierarchies.

[43] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia. *Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees*. December 17, 2021. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en (accessed July 30, 2025).

[44] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia. *Agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. December 17, 2021. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear_cache=Y (accessed July 30, 2025).

[45] Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," in *Handbook of Political Science. Volume 7: Strategies of Inquiry*, ed. Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1975), 109.

[46] For example: Isabell Burmester. "Bringing agency back in: neighbourhood countries' perceptions of their hegemonic power relation with the EU and Russia." *European Security* 33, no. 4 (2024): 615–43.

Data availability statement

No data is associated with this article.