

Institutional and Non-Institutional Factors in Great Powers' Strategic Decision-Making: A Case Study of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract: The war in Russia and Ukraine is a serious political problem for the whole world, and many states around the world have issued sanctions in response. Synthesize neoclassical realism and elite politics, draw case studies from academic research, policy reports and official statistics, and examine Russia's strategic decision-making process. It is also believed that Russia's decision to launch a large-scale military operation in Ukraine is not due to structural reasons, such as the expansion of NATO and a change in the balance of power. The conflict reveals that the structure of these constraints stems from a limited range of options among the top and operates through opaque internal mechanisms. Based on the study of institutional and informal factors under Putin, this paper presents both the speed of decision-making and significant strategic errors caused by authoritarian elite politics. This study has also found that there is an elite filter for authoritarian foreign policy and offers new ideas on the behaviour of great powers.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine conflict; strategic decision-making; elite politics; neoclassical realism

1. Introduction

In February 2022, the Russia-Ukraine war began and thus became a new political issue around the world [1]. In addition to the immediate humanitarian and military consequences, there have been broader changes in European security; as a result, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been accelerated in its expansion, and geopolitical tensions and strategic competition between the Russian Federation and the West have increased [2]. In addition, the conflict is not a sudden occurrence; rather, it is the result of a long-term strategic decline in Russia's influence and an unstable security situation [3]. From a theoretical perspective, structural realism considers the main reasons for Russia's behaviour to be NATO expansion, shifts in power and security dilemmas; however, these factors alone are insufficient to explain why Russia would choose high-risk, large-scale military operations despite the foreseeable economic, diplomatic and military costs [4]. Therefore, at the time of decision-making in Russia, one should consider what external pressures have been turned into policies. The concentration of power at the top has restricted the choices available through formal channels. As a result, Putin's ideas and leadership led the military decisions for Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 [5]. Therefore, this paper will investigate how institutional and non-institutional factors influence Russia's decisions in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In short, under the light of neoclassical realism and elite politics, it is argued that systemic pressures are transmitted through elite decision-making institutions and leaders' cognition and informal power networks. Based on the internal decisions of this paper, literature and expert analysis will be used to study how

institutional structure, elite dynamics and cognitive biases influence strategic choice in a highly centralised authoritarian system.

2. Russia's Political Structure and Strategic Decision-Making

2.1. Formal Decision-Making Institutions and Their Role in Strategic Decision-Making

The Russian Federation has an elaborate political system, and the president is at the top of this system, exercising extensive powers over foreign affairs, defence and security, etc., with the help of the government, Security Council, Ministry of Defence, and intelligence agencies. The above institutions provide channels for the above-mentioned information sharing, policy coordination and collective discussion, and the Security Council is an official advisory body for strategic issues. The operating conditions of the above institutions are relatively uneven due to differences in the severity of problems at different times and places [6].

Formal institutions and the executive branch also work together. The President legally appoints top officials, and unofficial networks coordinate work to run the government. Ministers' and senior officials' terms depend on the President's trust, and thus they will exercise institutional authority differently [7]. Changes in the career motivations of decision-makers may affect the goals of the institution and, in turn, the scope of policymaking and discussion. Formal institutions collect information, implement policies and operate the government. Institutional Design at the top level often does not align with the actual interests of executives in terms of power. Therefore, the president's goals and institutions are in a state of change. The institution provides a basis for decision-making and sets a relatively weak constraint on the selection of policy; therefore, in conjunction with other factors, the final strategic result will be determined.

2.2. Power Concentration and the Causal Chain of Strategic Misjudgment

Power in Russian politics today is highly concentrated at the top level. Centralisation under Putin has reduced the influence of the bureaucracy and sidelined other high-level groups to some extent. Thus, a "power vertical" has arisen, and its strategic choices will be significant. At the highest level of authority, decision-making in Russia is relatively personalised; thus, major decisions that affect the country frequently go through a small circle of long-term loyalists who often originate from the security services. And thus, this arrangement leads to a chain reaction: concentrated power, a narrow circle of decision-makers, uniform information, and unexamined assumptions.

Prospect Theory can help us understand the high-risk consequences of this mechanism better. Kahneman and Tversky's study shows that people tend to be more risk-seeking in the face of losses and more risk-averse in the face of gains [8]. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Putin's reference point changed significantly: Ukraine was regarded as an "inalienable loss" in the sphere of influence of Russia, and NATO expansion was seen as "accumulating losses" rather than posing a threat. Within this "loss frame", military intervention was viewed as a high-risk gamble necessary to cover the losses rather than a high-reward bet [9]. A certainty effect leads to an increase in the military option. For example, in February 2022, according to intelligence assessment, the Zelensky government would fall within 72 h; this demonstrates the cognitive bias of oversimplifying complex political and military realities into what appears to be a certain outcome. A strong commitment makes it hard to correct the mistake; otherwise, one would have to admit that they were wrong and accept the loss. This is a choice of relatively light testing and quick decision-making; efficiency will increase but the cost of errors will rise.

2.3. Structural Roots of Information Distortion

At the top level, the government will set the general direction for the economy. In a highly centralised system, information is not circulated bottom-up via neutral channels to the top, and political motives or personal loyalties may be involved. Some particular intelligence failures have also been caused by such distortions of information and show the reasons behind the institutional incentives. For example, in January 2022, the Fifth Service of the FSB (responsible for Ukraine affairs) submitted an assessment to Putin claiming that Ukrainian society was receptive to Russian intervention and that the Kyiv regime lacked popular support [10]. This report

did not meet the higher standards for GRU and was not used in the decision-making at the top. As a result, later evidence showed that FSB officials had suppressed pro-Western polls, ignored the post-2014 reforms in Ukraine, and fabricated “fifth column” plans to remain in power.

The cause of information asymmetry is an institutional incentive, not a technical or moral flaw. Therefore, the incentives for information providers are not uniform: accurate but negative information may trigger a “shooting the messenger” phenomenon, and false information that aligns with the wishes of the superior will not be held accountable. After Russia left Kyiv in April 2022, FSB Fifth Service head Sergei Beseda was put under house arrest, and parliamentarian Oleg Bondarev had questioned the war and was subsequently arrested. The risk-reward analysis of this will lead to intentional misrepresentation by intelligence staff to secure their support. Information distortion creates a self-reinforcing cycle; therefore, false assumptions continue to be made and additional information supporting them is actively sought to enhance confirmation bias. Therefore, authoritarian systems are prone to creating “information bubbles” in which decision-makers operate in environments without negative feedback, and concentrated power and controlled information flow worsen strategic misjudgments.

3. The Role of Institutional and Non-Institutional Factors in Russian Decision-Making

3.1. Institutional Structures’ Absence of Judgment and Execution Bias

Neoclassical realism holds that the domestic system is incapable of choosing freely and thus forwards pressures across all areas of policy implementation. However, the Russian case is of a more severe institutional pathology. Institutions have unequal distribution of decision-making power; they can be implemented effectively but lack early-stage supervision and correction.

The Constitution of the Russian Federation formally grants foreign and defence policy responsibilities to the President and establishes supporting structures for such work, such as the Security Council and military apparatus. The setup will be able to organise the mobilisation of state resources efficiently, coordinate inter-departmental work, and rapidly dispatch troops when Russia decides to send in troops to help Ukraine. However, the institution of execution can effectively mask front-end judgment errors. For example, in late 2021 and early 2022, the intelligence agencies’ reports on Ukrainian resistance did not trigger any institutional mechanisms for an independent reassessment. Although the Ministry of Finance was aware of the damage caused by sanctions, it had not been added to the national plan because there was no formal channel. The same applies to the career incentives of officials such as ministers, heads of intelligence and military departments, etc.; they are motivated to turn top-level goals into action plans without verifying the premise first. Therefore, the institution will implement the decision promptly, and coordination mechanisms will ensure that officials carry out the order consistently without question. As a result, the officials have formed an elite group and are unable to change the bad decisions.

3.2. Cognitive Solidification in Elite Consensus Structures

Institutions provide the foundation for plan execution, and other non-institutional factors also impact strategy. According to the theory of elite politics, a small number of people in the authoritarian country will be responsible for making the top decisions. The main group of this elite in Russia are long-term loyalists with similar security careers, parallel promotions, and a shared post-Soviet trauma [11].

Individual Cognition should not be regarded as an autonomous reason for decision-making, but rather as a product of and supported by the elite consensus system. Given the above circumstances, Putin’s belief in the “Russian-Ukrainian historical unity”, his concerns about a Western “colour revolution”, and his trust in the efficacy of coercive diplomacy are not his personal opinions but rather shared perceptions among the elite loyal to the long-term leadership, which have been repeatedly confirmed and strengthened. There is a strong group of epistemic communities in this space, such as top officials of the FSB, the Security Council and the highest echelons of the presidential administration. They continuously spread information through informal discussion networks, such as the Thursday meetings at the presidential residence, to form a self-reinforcing system of event interpretation.

Individual Worldviews and the Elite Consensus merge in this case. Top-level preferences establish the cognitive boundaries of the elite circle, and elite homogeneity fails to provide alternative information. Dissenting voices that question the practicality or cost of military intervention are not directly rejected by Putin; rather, they are filtered out structurally before reaching the top level of decision-making, and access to these networks depends less on formal positions and more on ideological conformity and personal loyalty, thus increasing the cost of challenging the consensus and reducing the incentives for such dissent [12].

3.3. Imbalanced Functional Division and Structural Consequences

As a result of institutions and other factors, there has been a very uneven distribution of decision-making power. There is a fixed division of labour among the institution and the elite: Informal elite networks set the discussion topics, determine which activities are deemed hazardous, and put forward corresponding countermeasures; formal organisations are responsible for raising funds and implementing policies. The structural defect of this division is that the institutions do not have error-correction and reassessment functions, and the elite network lacks external feedback mechanisms.

In the Russia-Ukraine case, systematic pressure such as the expansion of NATO has been interpreted through elite perspectives, and shared beliefs within informal networks have heightened threat perceptions and reduced diplomatic options. Therefore, institutional structures will promptly implement the unproven elite ideas as policy. Strong execution capabilities of institutions result in a “lock-in effect”; once military deployment has started, the inertia of inter-agency coordination, sunk costs and political pressure from public commitments severely limit the capacity for strategic adjustment. Paradoxically, the result of this interaction is that Russia is “efficiently moving towards an error”. Although the centralised system can make decisions and take action quickly, stronger institutional constraints raise the cost of correcting errors. A relatively weaker consensus among the elites will be achieved. The lack of a regular channel for expression of opinions has resulted in a few strategic shifts after February 2022, such as the Kyiv withdrawal and the Donbas pivot, and is likely due to poor strategic response capabilities rather than proactive decision-making; thus, there are underlying structural problems in role division.

4. Decision-Making Biases and Strategic Risks in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

4.1. Institutional Cognitive Biases: Overconfidence and Confirmation Bias

Cognitive biases are also prone to interfering with decision-making according to the theory of decision-making. However, the main idea of the Russian case is that these biases are not due to individual psychological traits but rather are systematic results of institutional structure. The two main biases in highly centralised systems are overconfidence and confirmation bias. We need to study the origins of these from the viewpoints of elite politics and organisational sociology.

The institutional cause of overconfidence is a “loose coupling” structure. According to Weick’s theory of organisations, a weak link in the formal structure and operations will not be able to convey negative feedback up the chain. The Ministry of Defence, intelligence services and the President in Russia have formed a system of strategic assessment, but the departments are in competition to provide optimistic reports, leading to a “competition in optimism” [13]. Before February 2022, the FSB, General Staff and Foreign Ministry made excessively optimistic assessments, and due to coordination among the Security Council and a lack of tight coupling, collective overconfidence and underestimation of risks resulted. Moreover, there is a form of confirmation bias in the closed-network system of information and a mechanism of “anticipatory obedience”, whereby subordinate organisations adjust information in line with the beliefs of senior management and overlook counter-signals. For example, the success of Crimea in 2014 was celebrated, but Ukrainian reforms and Western aid were ignored; thus, it was thought that elites had reached a consensus and dissent was excluded, so conformity guaranteed their positions, and groupthink protected the elite.

4.2. *Embedded Security Dilemma: Cognitive Construction at the Decision-Making Stage*

The traditional analysis of the security dilemma views it as an objective result of decision-making, but the Russian case shows that the logic of the security dilemma is embedded in elite cognitive construction at the decision-making level. According to the historical institutionalist school, the 2021 – 2022 decision was a landmark case. Systemic factors, such as the expansion of NATO and the move towards the West by Ukraine, as well as domestic reasons for change in the reset of the presidential term and shifts in the elite generation have created a window for revision of strategic direction [14]. However, the elite's interpretation of the threat is not objective evaluation but reconstruction of the strategic situation through the selective activation of "loss frames". NATO expansion is coded as "irreversible territorial loss" rather than a negotiable security arrangement, and Ukraine's European integration is perceived as "Western penetration" instead of sovereign choice. The error is not a deficiency in data, but rather an elite consensus to simplify the problems of geopolitics into a simple "security competition" narrative [15].

The Security Dilemma has three levels. First, there is a circle of threats, and Ukraine's defensive armaments have been viewed as "proof of NATO's offensive plans", thus reinforcing the opposition logic within the elite consensus. Second, preemption is based on the urgency of the situation; that is to say, there is a time constraint, and otherwise, an opportunity for defence would be lost due to the haste of the circumstances. Thirdly, the diplomatic alternative has been systematically closed off, and the Minsk Agreement and Normandy Format talks have been labelled by elite networks as "Western stalling tactics", thus eliminating possible solutions and promoting a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the military operation started in February 2022, the security dilemma was no longer the result of unintentional poor choices but a cognitive precondition for those decisions, and as such, potentially adjustable tensions had become irresolvable due to structural misperceptions.

4.3. *Path Dependence and Strategic Rigidity*

The structure of the decisions will lead to a problem of path dependence. The "efficiency" of loosely coupled organisations in the implementation stage rapidly converts initial errors into difficult-to-reverse sunk costs; once choices have been made at a certain point, the closure of the elite consensus excludes mechanisms for re-evaluation. After leaving Kyiv in March 2022, the system did not show a strategic change and gave reasons for its actions, such as "denazification". This indicated that commitment was rising, and elites continued to use resources to prove that their initial assessments were correct, even though the situation had worsened. Thus, the security dilemma has taken on a self-fulfilling characteristic; otherwise, without the disruption of external forces to the consensus and strategic initiative of the elites, they would remain in power indefinitely.

5. **Conclusions**

This study investigates Russia's strategic decisions in the Russia-Ukraine War based on neoclassical realism and elite politics. Therefore, the large-scale military operation in Russia cannot be attributed to only external factors such as NATO expansion. The above pressures are channeled through a very centralised elite system. In light of the above, elite authority, informal networks and control over information have formed a filter for decision-making efficiency but also reduced the capacity for error correction. By applying neoclassical realism's concept of "domestic intervening variables" to elite filtering and using prospect theory and organizational sociology's "loose coupling", this paper demonstrates the paradox of authoritarian decision-making: high efficiency but high error risk. Historical institutionalism's "critical juncture" idea can also be used to explain how the security dilemma shifts from a problem to an awareness in decision-making. This paper has relied on open-source and secondary data; as a result, the application of this study may be limited. Future research may compare other authoritarian systems, such as Cold War-era Soviet decision-making, to explore the application of the "elite filtering mechanism" and study how digital technologies alter information and decision-making in authoritarian regimes. Research on the Decision-making of the top leaders in authoritarian states helps predict their strategies and crisis-handling mechanisms to break down elite consensus more effectively than sanctions or deterrence.

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