

RESEARCH ARTICLE

State capacity, military modernisation, and balancing: A conditional model of state capacity neoclassical realism

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(Received 24 April 2024; revised 28 December 2024; accepted 26 January 2025)

Abstract

Typically, neoclassical realist scholars who prioritise state capacity as an intervening variable in their studies have often implied that states directly convert increased state capacity into improved military capabilities, leading them to engage in internal balancing and, occasionally, war. This article argues that the causal chain from state capacity to military modernisation and balancing is not as straightforward as the existing literature makes it look like. Using Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a plausibility-probe study, we propose that before states move from underbalancing to balancing, the process by which state capacity is translated into improved military capabilities might depend on conditional mechanisms. This novel theoretical model is labeled 'conditional state capacity neoclassical realism' and provides more case-specific explanatory power than the old state capacity theory.

Keywords: military modernisation; neoclassical realism; Russian foreign policy; Russia-Ukraine war; state capacity

Introduction

What role does state capacity play when a state goes from underbalancing to internal balancing? It has been common for neoclassical realist scholars who prioritise state capacity as an intervening variable in their studies to imply that state capacity is directly translated into military capabilities or leads to balancing without clearly specifying the mechanisms behind this causal relationship, even if they openly recognise that transmission belts between systemic factors and state behaviour are imperfect.¹ Some scholars have even gone as far as suggesting that state capacity can be measured by military spending, thus making no differentiation between the former and military capabilities.² Such a theoretical proposition can be called 'direct-causation state capacity neoclassical realism'.

¹Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman, 'Introduction: Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy', in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–41; Michiel Foulon, 'Neoclassical realism: Challengers and bridging identities', *International Studies Review*, 17:4 (2015), pp. 635–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12255>; Elias Götz, 'Putin, the state, and war: The causes of Russia's near abroad assertion revisited', *International Studies Review*, 19:2 (2017), pp. 228–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw009>.

²David Andersen, Jørgen Møller, Lasse Lykke Rørbæk, and Svend-Erik Skaaning, 'State capacity and political regime stability', *Democratization*, 21:7 (2014), pp. 1305–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.960204>.

Although it is often acknowledged that state capacity is a precondition for internal balancing, which requires the mobilisation and extraction of societal resources,³ there has been scant further theoretical development on the conditional mechanisms by which state capacity is translated into military modernisation, which enables a state to switch from underbalancing to balancing.

This article argues that state capacity neoclassical realism requires a theoretical revision. As opposed to the dominant ‘direct-causation’ model,⁴ a novel ‘conditional’ model of state capacity neoclassical realism is shown to add value by accounting for the complexity of the process by which state capacity improvement is converted into increased military capabilities. This model is relevant because it presents a more nuanced approach to capture state-level developments that influence policymaking and foreign policy decisions. Moreover, this article connects the neoclassical realist literature with the military-technological scholarship in international relations. By bridging these two areas, this article offers deeper insights into how structural and state-level factors shape military-technological decisions and war-making.

To illustrate the causal chain of the new model of state capacity neoclassical realism, this article examines, using the plausibility-probe method, Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This plausibility-probe study demonstrates that Russia’s conversion of state capacity into military power went through conditional mechanisms that shaped the foreign policy executive’s (FPE) assessment and actions regarding the capacity of Russian military capabilities in light of external threats: those mechanisms were the seismic event of the 2008 war in Georgia, the subsequent realisation by the Russian FPE that Russia’s military forces needed to be modernised, and the battle-testing of newly acquired capabilities in lower-intensity battlespaces. The resulting military modernisation developments were followed by changes in Russia’s policy towards the West in Ukraine, which could enable a more nuanced understanding of the shift from underbalancing to balancing represented by the full-fledged invasion.

The foreign policy executive consists primarily of the head of government and foreign minister but is widened according to the issue area, such as defence, finance, or trade.⁵ For this article, which focuses on foreign and defence policy, the relevant FPE is the president, the foreign minister, the defence minister, defence and foreign policy advisors, high-ranking military officials, and all defence-related agencies that help in the formulation or implementation of foreign and defence policy. This does not mean this article will cover every single one of these actors, but it will cover a significant portion of them, including the president, the defence minister, and high-ranking military officials.

This is a predominantly theoretical article whose novel conditional state capacity model is driven by the empirical puzzle of the Russian case. This could raise concerns about whether the plausibility-probe case is self-evident and whether the research design is subordinated to the empirical case. However, it is important to have in mind that plausibility probes allow ‘for relaxed expectations regarding case selection and selection bias in the assumption that findings require further testing and verification in future research.’⁶ That is because plausibility probes are not testing the validity of a theory, which would require more systematic theory-testing methods that address case selection and maybe even confounders. Instead, a plausibility probe simply aims to illustrate the potential of a theoretical proposal through a reasonable empirical instance.⁷

³Steven Lobell, ‘A granular theory of balancing’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:3 (2018), pp. 593–605, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy011>.

⁴Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘State building for future wars: Neoclassical realism and the resource-extractive state’, *Security Studies*, 15:3 (2006), pp. 464–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410601028370>; Elias Götz, ‘Taking the longer view: A neoclassical realist account of Russia’s neighbourhood policy’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74:9 (2022), pp. 1729–63.

⁵Christopher Hill, *Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 63; Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 61.

⁶Jana Krause, ‘Restrained or constrained? Elections, communal conflicts, and variation in sexual violence’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 51:1 (2020), pp. 185–198 (p. 189), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319891763>.

⁷Juliet Kaarbo and Ryan K. Beasley, ‘A practical guide to the comparative case study method in political psychology’, *Political Psychology*, 20:2 (1999), pp. 369–91.

The timeframe of our analysis starts in 2008 because this was the year when the Russian FPE initiated military reforms following the Russo-Georgian War, and it goes up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The objective of this research is not to analyse the performance of Russia's forces in Ukraine but, instead, to lay out Russia's military capability-building efforts leading up to the 2022 invasion, offering an amendment to state-capacity neoclassical realism based on the evidence presented. It is also important to clarify that, for this article, Russia's balancing behaviour under examination is against the West in Ukraine rather than Ukraine itself.

This article is structured as follows: first, we examine the dominant direct-causation state capacity neoclassical realist literature and offer a conditional-causation revision. Second, we tap into some of the key works in the existing scholarship to define balancing and underbalancing. Thirdly, the methodology of this article is discussed. Lastly, we illustrate our conditional model by studying Russia's post-Georgia military modernisation leading up to the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In this plausibility-probe case study, we conduct our empirical analysis of Russia's military modernisation programmes and advance our conditional state capacity neoclassical realist framework to explain the conditional mechanisms through which Russia translated increased state capacity into military capabilities before invading Ukraine.

State capacity neoclassical realism: Direct vs conditional causation

This article forwards the assumption that state capacity is a key intervening variable between the independent variable of systemic pressures and the dependent variable of the state's choice of balancing behaviour. States with greater capacity to raise revenues, mobilise resources, and enlist military personnel in a timely fashion are more likely to respond decisively to systemic pressures.⁸ On the other hand, states with weaker mobilisation, resource extraction, and administrative capacity are more likely to underbalance against dangerous, unappeasable threats. Although it has arguably fallen out of favour as neoclassical realism continues to evolve,⁹ both direct- and conditional-causation models of state capacity neoclassical realism fall within the Type I tradition of neoclassical realism, as both place state capacity as the key intervening variable.¹⁰ Type I neoclassical realism is the closest to structural realism in that it assumes the primacy of the international system as it mostly tries to ascertain why a state did not follow an expected pathway in responding to systemic changes.¹¹

However, whereas direct-causation state capacity neoclassical realism typically implies that state capacity is automatically converted into military power, the conditional model holds that the conversion of existing state capacity into effective military power for balancing purposes depends on how the FPE evaluates the real-world pressures, incentives, experiences, and necessities to ramp up its state's military capabilities.

⁸Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 24.

⁹Shiping Tang, 'Neoclassical realism: Methodological critiques and remedies', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2023), pp. 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad009>; Panos Vasileiadis, 'Reconstructing neoclassical realism: A transitive approach', *International Relations* (2023), pp. 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231185747>.

¹⁰As Smith noted, the confines for Type I neoclassical realism are quite large: 'While a distinction between type I and type II NCR is a useful one to make – and this distinction can be clearly seen in shorter NCR analyses – most comprehensive NCR analyses tend to try to understand identified anomalies (or puzzles) while also offering a comprehensive examination of the domestic-level impact on their examined state's (or institution) foreign policy outcome. As evident in the two books reviewed above, both Juneau's and Diesen's work have elements of what Ripsman et al. identify as type I and type II NCR' (Nicholas Ross Smith, 'Can neoclassical realism become a genuine theory of international relations?', *Journal of Politics*, 80:2 [2018], pp. 742–9, <https://doi.org/10.1086/696882> [p. 747]). Even if some Type I theories we draw inspiration from – such as Schweller's theory of underbalancing – are more committed to parsimony than conditional state capacity neoclassical realism, agreeing on every single theoretical-structural detail is no requirement. Conditional causation state capacity still emphasises system-level cause as the independent variable while delving more deeply into state-level variables, despite the lower parsimony (Smith, 'Can neoclassical realism').

¹¹Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp. 26–32.

This section begins with an overview of the pertinent works of (direct-causation) state capacity neoclassical realism. Thereafter, a proposed amendment of state capacity neoclassical realism (conditional causation) is theoretically developed.

Direct-causation state capacity neoclassical realism

The question of how state capacity building, translated into military capabilities, shapes balancing behaviour, more specifically internal balancing, was first examined through a neoclassical realist lens by Zakaria.¹² Zakaria uses the anomalous behaviour of the United States in the 19th century to demonstrate his theory. According to Zakaria, before the 1890s, the United States was presided over by a weak, divided government that had enormous difficulties in extracting resources from society to achieve foreign policy objectives. Only by the 1890s, when power shifted from the legislative to the executive branch on foreign policy, was the United States able to attain its power projection ambitions regionally. Zakaria's contribution suggests that once its state capacity was built, the United States became a strong military power in the Western Hemisphere.

Beyond Zakaria's initial contribution, other scholars have offered useful theoretical and empirical contributions. Taliaferro's neoclassical realist model of resource extraction seeks to explain how states choose among different types of internal balancing strategies to enhance survival.¹³ For Taliaferro, the independent variable is the level of external vulnerability, defined by the relative distribution of power, the offence–defence balance, and geography; the intervening variable is state power, defined as the degree to which states can coercively extract or contractually mobilise societal resources; and, finally, the dependent variable is the survival strategy (emulation, innovation, or continuity of the existing strategies). According to Taliaferro's resource-extraction model, the state directly converts societal wealth into military power by exercising state power through taxation, requisition, and expropriation.¹⁴

More recently, Götz advanced state capacity neoclassical realism through the study of Russia's Baltic security policies from 1995 to the present.¹⁵ State capacity for Götz constitutes a moderating variable that conditions the impact of systemic impulses on foreign policy behaviour.¹⁶ According to Götz, state capacity is defined as the ability of the state to mobilise resources and collect taxes from society (extraction) and formulate and implement decisions against the wish of powerful interest groups (autonomy). From 1995 to 2003, Russia's state capacity was weak, marked by a torn-apart tax collection system and widespread capital flight, interest groups (especially business tycoons) playing an important role in the formation of state policy, and regional fragmentation, with the two conflicts in Chechnya being the most evident example. As a result, Russia was unable to respond to NATO's Baltic expansion during those years. However, by 2004, a new tax code had been introduced under the Putin administration, tax concessions to regional entities were removed, and restructuring of the Federal Tax Service took place. Consequently, the ratio of tax-revenue-to-GDP increased from 9.2 per cent in 1998 to 24.5 per cent in 2006, and the federal centre was strengthened over regional entities.¹⁷ Götz argues that this improvement in state capacity

¹²Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹³Taliaferro, 'State building for future wars'.

¹⁴Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 'Neoclassical realism and resource extraction: State building for future war', in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 194–226.

¹⁵Elias Götz, 'Enemy at the gates: A neoclassical realist explanation of Russia's Baltic policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15:1 (2017), pp. 1–19.

¹⁶Elias Götz, 'Neoclassical realist theories, intervening variables, and paradigmatic boundaries', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 17:2 (2021), pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa026>.

¹⁷Brian Taylor, *State Building in Putin's Russia: Policing and Coercion after Communism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); David White, 'State capacity and regime resilience in Putin's Russia', *International Political Science Review*, 39:1 (2018), pp. 130–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512117694481>.

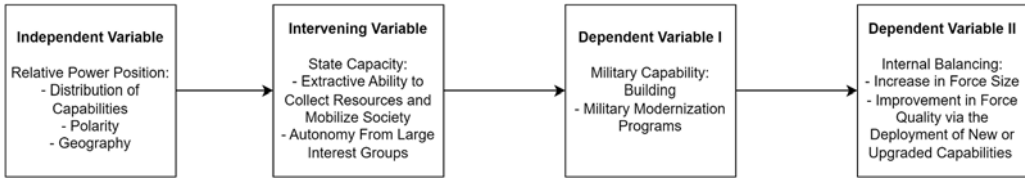


Figure 1 Direct-causation state capacity neoclassical realism: causal chain.

Source: authors.

was translated into a more assertive Baltic policy: Russia started offering logistical and financial support to Russian-friendly groups, stepped up support for Russian-language schools and Russian-speaking outlets in the region, conducted cyberattacks against the region (such as the one against Estonia in 2007), and violated Baltic airspace multiple times. The reason why Russia has abstained from using force against Baltic states and has instead resorted to subversion is attributed to the risk of a military confrontation with NATO. Nevertheless, enhanced fiscal capacity was a fundamental factor which provided Russia's FPE with the wherewithal to build a military with greater ability to project force over neighbouring states.¹⁸ Here, Götz also implicitly makes it look like there is a direct causality between state capacity building and military power. For him, Russia's improved state capacity was directly translated into a more assertive policy towards the Baltic and East Europe and a reassertion of military and political control over Chechnya. Like previous leading works on state capacity, there is no conditional mechanism intermediating the conversion of state capacity into military capabilities. Figure 1 illustrates how direct-causation state capacity neoclassical realism sees this causal process.

This approach of direct causation, however, might fail to capture some processes in which the conversion of state capacity into military capabilities and balancing were not straightforward but, instead, relied on intermediary, conditional mechanisms that were imperative for the linkage between relative power position, state capacity, and military capabilities and balancing. This does not mean that direct-causation state capacity should be rejected altogether. Instead, it means that direct-causation state capacity should be revised to account for such empirical nuances. States might not always go from building state capacity to building military power. Sometimes, for this conversion to take place, a seismic event that triggers a domestic re-evaluation of the state's capabilities and military needs is a necessary step, as we address below.

Conditional state capacity neoclassical realism

In the conditional model of state capacity neoclassical realism, we adopt the same definition of state capacity as Götz: state capacity is the extractive ability of the state to mobilise resources and collect taxes from society and the autonomy to formulate and implement decisions against the parochial aspirations of powerful interest groups. As much as this approach might miss out on the increasing role of dense networks of relations between states and national, subnational, and international actors as well as the role that informational infrastructure plays in an information and communication world,¹⁹ it still addresses the most important functions for war-making: extracting resources and mobilising society without the extreme interference of parochial interests. This article's definition of state capacity does not aim to capture the entire complexity of this phenomenon, but rather the most imperative functions that a state needs to wage war from a capability standpoint, which

¹⁸Götz, 'Taking the longer view'; Roger Kanet, 'Russia's enhanced role in Eurasia: The "near abroad" three decades on', *European Politics and Society*, 24:3 (2022), 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2050585>.

¹⁹Mark Robinson, 'Hybrid states: Globalisation and the politics of state capacity', *Political Studies*, 56:3 (2008), pp. 566–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2008.00751.x>; Antoaneta Dimitrova, Honorata Mazepus, Dimiter Toshkov, et al., 'The dual role of state capacity in opening socio-political orders: Assessment of different elements of state capacity in Belarus and Ukraine', *East European Politics*, 37:1, pp. 19–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1756783>.

is largely consistent with the approach taken by the leading neoclassical realist authors, including Götz and Zakaria. By extracting resources and mobilising society, the state can fund and staff its armed forces, obtain weaponry and equipment, and support war efforts consistently.

Adopting a conditional causation stance to state capacity neoclassical realism is a novel development. One of the few scholarly pieces that offers a fruitful glimpse into how conditional mechanisms modulate the process from improved state capacity to military capability building is Can and Viera's research article on China's military–civil fusion (MCF) strategy. According to these two authors, China mobilises and extracts resources to foster its technological and military capabilities through the MCF strategy, acting in accordance with the postulates of state capacity neoclassical realism.²⁰ By promoting the collaboration between state-owned defence contractors, People's Liberation Army (PLA)-supervised academic research institutions, private investment actors, and private dual-use manufacturers, China converts its state capacity, predicated upon a set of increasingly advanced technological capabilities, into military technology. Nevertheless, the explanation of the extent to which this conditional process leads to specific foreign policy outcomes in a global or regional domain remains vague in their article.

The conditional model of state capacity neoclassical realism is rigorously aligned with the evidence of previous studies, which show that state capacity is a key enabler of military power. The main difference is the inclusion of the process through which state capacity is converted into military capabilities and leads to balancing. Consequently, discussing the independent, intervening, and dependent variables and conditional mechanisms in detail will contribute to a better comprehension of this theoretical model.

The independent variable of conditional state capacity, like all variants of neoclassical realism, is the state's relative power position in the international system.²¹ This article takes inspiration from Schweller's 'theory of mistakes' version of Type I neoclassical realism as we aim to evaluate a puzzling 'policy choice solely in terms of the international strategic setting'.²² For this article, the anomalous behaviour being examined is how Russia went from underbalancing to balancing.

A state's relative power position in the international system is best understood through two intertwined factors. First, the primary systemic driver of foreign policy is a state's position in the international system. The polarity of the international system, which counts how many great powers there are and describes the distribution of economic and military capabilities between them, is the key source of systemic pressure.²³ The number of great powers in the system and the distribution of capabilities between them constrain the foreign policy options of states. States faced with one or more rival great powers operate under a contested environment that shapes how their foreign and defence policy is carried out.²⁴ In contrast, in a system where a state faces no great-power rivalry, its freedom of action will be greater.²⁵ Hence, following the tradition of the conventional neoclassical realist literature, a state's relative power position remains the independent variable. Importantly, this variable operates not only at the global level, but also in regional settings. States, especially continental powers bordering neighbouring states, tend to prioritise regional threats

²⁰Muhammed Can and Alena Vieira, 'The Chinese military-civil fusion strategy: A state action theory perspective', *The International Spectator*, 57:3 (2022), pp. 85–102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2022.2080262>.

²¹Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, pp. 33–57; Smith, 'Can neoclassical realism'.

²²Randall Schweller, 'Unanswered threats: A neoclassical realist theory of underbalancing', *International Security*, 29:2 (2004), pp. 159–201 (p. 168), <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288042879913>.

²³Nuno Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lauro Borges, 'Leading sectors and polarity change in the context of US–China competition: A process-based analysis of the origins of polarity shift', *International Politics*, 60:6 (2023), pp. 1159–86, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00507-y>.

²⁴Luis Simon, 'Preparing NATO for the future: Operating in an increasingly contested environment', *The International Spectator*, 52:3 (2017), pp. 121–35; Mark Gunzinger, Carl Rehberg, Jacob Cohn, Timothy A. Walton, and Lukas Autenried, *An Air Force for an Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019); Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 54; Lauro Borges and Regina Lucena, 'Polarity in the context of U.S.–China competition: Reassessing analytical criteria', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 17:3 (2023), pp. 4–32, <https://doi.org/10.51870/XVBP8977>.

²⁵Robert Kelly, 'Security theory in the "new regionalism"', *International Studies Review*, 9:2 (2007), pp. 197–229.

over global ones.²⁶ Even the threat posed by a sea-based global power from a different region is region-centric. To project force into another region, the global power needs to collaborate with local powers and forge alliances to surmount the constraints of geographical distance and topographical challenges through military bases or installations – referred to as ‘infrastructure of the commons’ by Barry Posen.²⁷

Second, an important interlinked systemic factor is the distribution of power in the international system, manifested as a state’s relative power. The rise (or fall) in the power of a state not only has repercussions for how it will act but also for how other states in turn will adjust.²⁸ Unlike typically more ‘scientific’ structural realist studies, neoclassical realists hold that the true nature of the international system cannot be adequately quantified. Rather, it is subjectively interpreted and judged by foreign policy decision-makers, leading to inconsistencies and disputation between different entities.²⁹ This means that, over the short and medium terms, a state’s foreign policies may not be objectively ‘efficient’ or predictable based on an objective assessment of relative power, which represents neoclassical realism’s major critique of structural realism and the justification for bringing the state-level variables into explanations.³⁰

The intervening variable is state capacity. State capacity is an enabler of internal balancing. Without the ability to extract resources and mobilise society, states cannot create sufficient military capabilities to internally balance against rival great powers. Nevertheless, before this intervening variable causes military modernisation and leads to balancing, three conditional mechanisms must come along: a seismic event and a change in the FPE’s judgement of their state’s military capabilities (driven by the seismic event). Conditional mechanisms refer to specific factors that are present in the realisation of a causal relationship. Unpacking conditional mechanisms involves linking cause to effects at a more detailed level, thus going beyond typical process-tracing analysis; it implies the identification of highly imperative conditions for a causal chain to come about.³¹ By accounting for conditional mechanisms, it is possible to grasp the complexity of the conditions under which a cause leads to an effect, enriching the knowledge about the relationship between the independent, intervening, and dependent variables.

The FPE’s judgement refers to how a country’s military planners and policymakers assess the military capabilities of its state and define the needs and priorities of its military forces based on real-world experience. However, if a state possesses state capacity but its FPE is not met with any seismic real-world experience that induces this FPE to thoroughly modernise or considerably increase its state’s military capabilities to address a threat, underbalancing is more likely to take place.

What constitutes a seismic event? To define what a seismic event is in the context of balancing strategies, this article draws upon the crisis literature.³² In this sense, a seismic event can be defined as a major incident involving the potential or actual use of military force that defies the existing

²⁶ Colin Elman, ‘Extending offensive realism: The Louisiana Purchase and America’s rise to regional hegemony’, *American Political Science Review*, 98:4 (2004), pp. 563–76; Jack Levy and William Thompson, ‘Balancing on land and at sea: Do states ally against the leading global power?’, *International Security*, 35:1 (2010), pp. 7–43; Stephen Walt, ‘Alliances in a unipolar world’, in John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 99–139.

²⁷ Harvey Starr and Randolph M. Siverson, ‘Alliances and geopolitics’, *Political Geography Quarterly*, 9:3 (1990), pp. 232–48; Barry Posen, ‘Command of the commons: The military foundation of U.S. hegemony’, *International Security*, 28:1 (2003), pp. 5–46.

²⁸ Volker Rittberger, *Approaches to the Study of Foreign Policy: Derived from International Relations Theories* (Tübingen: Universität Tübingen, 2004).

²⁹ Schweller, ‘Unanswered threats’.

³⁰ Taliaferro, ‘State building for future wars’.

³¹ Jack Levy, ‘Preferences, constraints, and choices in July 1914’, *International Security*, 15:3 (1990–1), pp. 151–86; Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, ‘Selecting appropriate cases when tracing causal mechanisms’, *Sociological Methods & Research*, 47:4 (2018), pp. 837–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124115622510>.

³² Paul’t Hart and Arjen Boin, ‘Between crisis and normalcy: The long shadow of post-crisis politics’, in Uriel Rosenthal, Arjen Boin, and Louise K. Comfort (eds), *Managing Crises: Threats, Dilemmas, Opportunities* (Springfield, IL: Charles C

defence policy. Even if such major incident can be anticipated or results from a slow, relatively predictable build-up rather than a completely unexpected event, a seismic event can shape defence policy by leading the FPE to reconsider its military posture. For example, it took the 1939 invasion of Poland for Britain to decisively balance against Germany via war. Before that, Britain sought to avoid entangling itself in military efforts and commitments to contain German expansion in continental Europe as much as possible.³³ A real-world seismic event – especially a war – might lead the FPE to identify shortcomings or insufficiencies in its military capabilities in light of the existing threats, to redefine needs and priorities, and to engage in modernisation efforts to address such shortcomings or insufficiencies. Modernisation programmes then strengthen the military capabilities of the state. The first dependent variable, military modernisation or capability building, constitutes a fundamental domestic origin of balancing, which, to take place, goes through another conditional mechanism: the battle-testing of newly acquired (new or updated-legacy) weapons systems.

The third conditional mechanism, battle-testing of newly acquired weapons systems, allows states to capture the real-combat performance of the capabilities that result from military modernisation programmes. In the military history literature, it is not uncommon to find instances where states use lower-intensity conflicts or foreign wars as ‘testing grounds’ for new or updated military equipment. A landmark example is the Spanish Civil War (1936–9), where Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union tested weapons systems such as tanks and armoured vehicles in Spain’s battlespace.³⁴ In the modern world, Iran’s provision of one-way attack drones to Russia is another example of battle-testing.³⁵ This has allowed Iran to test the effectiveness of its Shahed-136 drones in massed attacks against capable air defences in a high-intensity foreign war. These one-way attack drones, with which Iran has been supplying Russia since 2022, were employed in the April 2024 Iranian massed drone-missile attack against Israel, which showed similar patterns to Russia’s massed drone-missile attacks against Ukraine from 2022 to 2024.³⁶ Although simulations and exercises do indicate the expected performance of new and updated-legacy weapons systems, battle-damage assessments in combat situations provide real-world evidence of the weapons’ ability to inflict damage on the enemy.³⁷ Thus, when states test their military capabilities in lower-intensity combat situations or foreign wars before balancing, they are able to discern their level of military preparedness. Essentially, the seismic event, the consequential change in the FPE’s assessment of their respective state’s military capabilities followed by military modernisation, and the battle-testing of new military capabilities are the conditional mechanisms between state capacity and military capability building.

Finally, the second dependent variable is balancing choice. After translating state capacity into military modernisation programmes, the FPE is more likely to engage in balancing against a threat

Thomas Publisher, 2001), pp. 28–46; Stephan Gundel, ‘Towards a new typology of crises’, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 13:3 (2005), pp. 106–15.

³³Mark Brawley, ‘Neoclassical realism and strategic calculations: Explaining divergent British, French, and Soviet strategies toward Germany between the world wars (1919–1939)’, in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 75–98.

³⁴Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987); Anthony J. Candil, *Tank Combat in Spain: Armored Warfare during the Spanish Civil War 1936–1939* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2021).

³⁵Mohammad Eslami, ‘Iran’s drone supply to Russia and changing dynamics of the Ukraine war’, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 5:2 (2022), pp. 507–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2149077>.

³⁶Frud Bezhan, ‘Explainer: The “kamikaze” drones Iran used to attack Israel’, *Radio Free Europe* (14 April 2024), available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-shahed-drones-israel-attack/32904882.html>; Stacie Pettyjohn, *Evolution Not Revolution: Drone Warfare in Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2024), pp. 1–34.

³⁷Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2001); Douglas E. Lee, ‘Transforming battle damage assessment into effects-based assessment’, *Air & Space Power Journal*, 20:1 (2001), pp. 51–2; Heather Penney, ‘Scale, scope, speed & survivability: Winning the kill chain competition’, Mitchell Institute Policy Paper, Vol. 40 (2023).

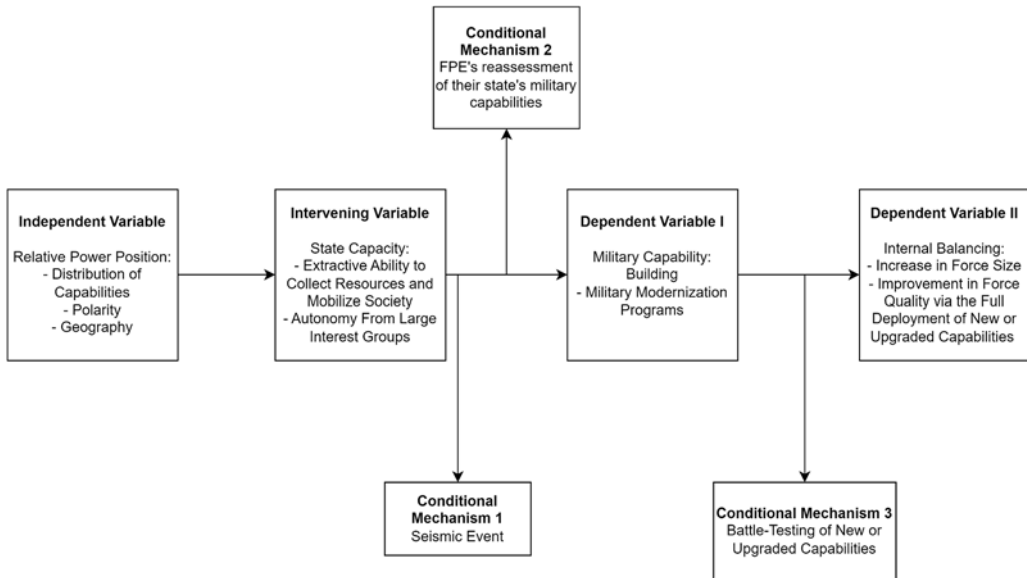


Figure 2 Causal chain: Conditional state capacity.
Source: authors.

or group of threats. The decision to balance against a threat comes after testing capabilities in a real-combat situation. If a state fully incorporates these new capabilities into their arsenal, thus building up their arms and applying them against a specific threat, they are engaging in balancing. Figure 2 summarises this causal chain.

Ultimately, this new model does not intend to outright reject direct-causality state capacity neo-classical realism. Instead, we argue that the transformation of enhanced state capacity into military capabilities is not always as straightforward as implicitly presumed by the mainstream literature.

Balancing and underbalancing

Structural realist theories typically argue that balancing is an outcome driven by the anarchic structure of the international system. Anarchy is defined as the absence of a higher authority above the states to enforce laws and norms of behaviour to protect states from each other.³⁸ In this environment, states tend to fear the offensive military capabilities of their peers and are uncertain about their intentions.³⁹ Consequently, balancing is a method that states employ to counter the rising, offensive capabilities of rival states or threats.⁴⁰ States can balance in two ways: internal balancing and external balancing. Internal balancing occurs when states increase their own military power.⁴¹ One way they internal-balance is by arming, that is, bolstering military spending, weapons production, troop levels, or some combination thereof. Another is by emulating the successful

³⁸Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the security dilemma', *World Politics*, 30:2 (1978), pp. 167–214, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979).

³⁹John Mearsheimer, 'The false promise of international institutions', *International Security*, 19:3 (1994–5), pp. 5–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>.

⁴⁰John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), pp. 13–14; Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 1–38; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 118.

⁴¹James D. Morrow, 'Arms versus allies: Trade-offs in the search for security', *International Organization*, 47:2 (1993), pp. 207–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027922>; Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, 'Hard times for soft balancing', *International Security*, 30:1 (2005), pp. 72–108.

military practices of other states, especially their doctrinal or technological innovations.⁴² External balancing occurs when states align or form alliances to deter or defend against common enemies.⁴³

Many realists have observed that states often do not implement balancing strategies (internal or external) in a timely, appropriate manner. The reasons for this vary across the literature. Structural realists tend to attribute the causes of ineffective balancing to systemic factors, such as the polarity of the system and geographical distance.⁴⁴ Alternatively, neoclassical realists have focused on domestic-level explanations, such as the role of interest groups in the policymaking process, ideological myths, and perceptions of offensive and defensive advantages.⁴⁵ One of the most prominent contributions from neoclassical realism on imperfect balancing is Schweller's underbalancing theory. Schweller argues that underbalancing – defined as a lack of balancing or insufficient response against a dangerous, unappeasable aggressor – can be explained by four unit-level variables: elite consensus, government or regime vulnerability, social cohesion, and elite cohesion.⁴⁶ Later on, Schweller added state mobilisation capacity as another state-level constraint on efficient, timely balancing.⁴⁷

In our article, we focus mainly on internal balancing. Our definition of underbalancing and balancing matches the standard definitions provided by the leading authors mentioned.

Underbalancing is defined in terms of doing very little to nothing from a military standpoint to contain a rising threat.⁴⁸ To measure underbalancing, it is possible to examine two indicators: the type of defence investments and military action. If a state does not increase defence investments in domains that are relevant to counter a rising or existing threat or does not undertake military action against it, its behaviour can be defined as underbalancing behaviour. Alternatively, internal balancing can be measured by the same indicators, but with different outcomes. If a state increases defence investments in domains that are relevant to counter a rising or existing threat or undertakes military action against it, its behaviour can be described as balancing behaviour.⁴⁹

These criteria draw inspiration from the standard military approach to balancing proposed by the leading scholars in the area.⁵⁰ These scholars similarly have a military-oriented definition of balancing, which is the approach adopted in this article. Consequently, we do not engage with the concept of soft balancing or any other non-military form of balancing.

Methodology: A plausibility-probe case study

To illustrate conditional state capacity neoclassical realism, this article adopts an overarching plausibility-probe case study focused on Russia's defence policy towards the West in Ukraine after the post-Georgian War reforms. Was Russia's increasing assertiveness in Ukraine a result

⁴²Joseph Parent and Sebastian Rosato, 'Balancing in neorealism', *International Security*, 40:2 (2015), pp. 51–86, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00216.

⁴³Sangit Dwivedi, 'Alliances in International Relations theory', *International Journal of Social Science & Interdisciplinary Research*, 1:8 (2012), pp. 224–37; Nicholas Ross Smith, 'New Zealand's grand strategic options as the room for hedging continues to shrink', *Comparative Strategy*, 41:3 (2022), pp. 314–27.

⁴⁴Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 161–7; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 267–333.

⁴⁵Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder, 'Chain gangs and passed bucks: Predicting alliance patterns in multipolarity', *International Organization*, 44:2 (1990), pp. 137–68; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁴⁶Schweller, 'Unanswered threats'.

⁴⁷Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴⁸Schweller, 'Unanswered threats', p. 168.

⁴⁹Lobell, 'A granular theory of balancing'.

⁵⁰Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 118; Morrow, 'Arms versus allies', p. 208; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 1–167; Schweller, 'Unanswered threats', p. 166; Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, pp. 9–10; Parent and Rosato, 'Balancing in neorealism', p. 56; Eugene Gholz, 'Emerging technologies' potential to change the balance of power in Asia', in Richard A. Bitzinger (ed.), *Emerging Critical Technologies and Security in the Asia-Pacific* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 53–62; Lobell, 'A granular theory of balancing', pp. 594–8.

of improved state capacity directly converted into military capabilities? Or did it go through conditional mechanisms from 2008 to the 2022 full-fledged invasion? The leading state capacity scholarship has often focused on Russia's defence policy as a case study that corroborates the direct-causation model.⁵¹ For this reason, our article uses Russia's defence policy towards the West in Ukraine, found in official documents and secondary sources, to exemplify the conditional model of state capacity neoclassical realism. Consequently, the case selection here follows the precedent of the existing theoretical-empirical literature on state capacity and military capability.

Plausibility probes aim to sharpen a theory or hypothesis, refine the operationalisation of key variables and mechanisms, and illustrate a theoretical argument.⁵² They fall short of the degree of complexity needed to fully explain a case or test a theoretical proposition. Instead, plausibility probes give the reader a snapshot of the theoretical argument by providing an example of its concrete application.⁵³ They serve an important function in the first steps of theory development. In this vein, this single-case plausibility-probe study aims to simply illustrate the application of the proposed theory of conditional state capacity neoclassical realism rather than conduct full-fledged theory testing. If the theory is deemed plausible, more elaborate testing can be conducted on it by examining different cases.

Plausibility probes, being a preliminary empirical illustration of a theory, do not lead to generalisability. If a theory is concluded to be plausible, theory-testing case studies can try to determine how generalisable that theory is. Nonetheless, neoclassical realist frameworks mostly focus on accounting for outcomes in a more nuanced fashion over parsimony and generalisability.⁵⁴ For neoclassical realists, a rich explanation of international phenomena is more important than generalisable knowledge. Therefore, following the tradition of neoclassical realism, conditional state capacity neoclassical realism privileges explanatory accuracy over generalisability.

The usefulness of adding more conditional variables to the universe of intervening variables lies in the richness of the explanatory power offered by the proposed theory and the unpacking of context compared to the more simplified explanations offered by parsimonious theory. Parsimony allows pattern-like explanations, whereas context-rich, non-parsimonious theory allows case-specific explanatory power. This approach also aligns with neoclassical realist tradition.

Taking that into consideration, this case study focuses on the following variables: systemic pressure as a function of Russia's relative power position and geography, which in neoclassical realism is the key driver of state behaviour; state capacity in terms of tax collection, revenues, and federal autonomy; the seismic event in Georgia and how it shaped Russia's defence policy; the FPE's subsequent reassessment of Russia's military priorities and capabilities; the capability testing of newly acquired weapons systems and equipment; and the evolution of balancing strategy against the West in Ukraine.

The relevant FPE in this article are military leaders, such as high-ranked officers of the Russian military forces, the defence minister, and the president. To measure the judgement of the Russian FPE, we utilise data provided by primary and secondary sources, including statements from high-ranking officers and the scholarly studies that analyse the post-Georgian War modernisation programmes. We also look at the programmes' objectives and accomplishments.

Importantly, this is predominantly a qualitative case study. Neoclassical realist studies are typically qualitative in nature and approach the collected data from a neopositivist epistemological position that holds that 'scientific success is not the attainment of objective truth, but the attainment of wider agreement on descriptive facts.'⁵⁵ Additionally, some quantitative data is used

⁵¹Götz, 'Putin, the state, and war'; Götz, 'Enemy at the gates'; Götz, 'Taking the longer view'.

⁵²Jack Levy, 'Case studies: Types, designs, and logics of inference', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 25:1 (2008), pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07388940701860318>.

⁵³Harry Eckstein, 'Case studies and theory in political science', in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby (eds), *Handbook of Political Science* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 79–137.

⁵⁴Derek Beach, *Analyzing Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 63–70.

⁵⁵Robert O. Keohane, 'Beyond dichotomy: Conversations between International Relations and feminist theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 42:1 (1998), pp. 193–197 (p. 195).

in a supplementary way. Data on weapons systems and the military modernisation programmes are obtained from outside sources, mainly primary sources and scientific articles.

Ultimately, when analysing the statements of officials, the objective is to find out whether there is a reassessment after the seismic shock in Georgia: do Russian officials identify the need to modernise Russia's military capabilities after the seismic event?

Russia's post-Georgian war military modernisation programmes and full-scale balancing in Ukraine (2008–22): A conditional state capacity neoclassical realist analysis

In justifying the need for an invasion, Russian president Vladimir Putin stated that it was now clear that Russia had not done enough to prevent the West and Ukraine from forging closer relations and had now entered a situation where it threatened Russia's apparent existential security. In his announcement of the invasion, Putin stated that:

In December 2021, we made yet another attempt to reach agreement with the United States and its allies on the principles of European security and NATO's non-expansion. Our efforts were in vain. The United States has not changed its position. It does not believe it necessary to agree with Russia on a matter that is critical for us. If history is any guide, we know that in 1940 and early 1941 the Soviet Union went to great lengths to prevent war or at least delay its outbreak. To this end, the USSR sought not to provoke the potential aggressor until the very end by refraining or postponing the most urgent and obvious preparations it had to make to defend itself from an imminent attack. When it finally acted, it was too late. We will not make this mistake the second time.⁵⁶

This indicates that despite the annexation of Crimea and the support of proxy separatist forces in the Donbas region, coupled with the fact that Ukraine's prospective memberships in both NATO and the EU remained murky, Putin seemed to believe that Russia still did not effectively balance against the West in Ukraine. Essentially, Russia did not prevent the strengthening of a threat: losing Ukraine to the West. Only a full-scale invasion would address the problem. In this sense, a more in-depth discussion of Russia's relative power position needs to take place so that the independent variable, defined as Russia's relative power position in the international system, can be better understood in this context.

Systemic pressure and Russia's relative power position in Ukraine

Changing international power dynamics are crucial to understanding, in part, how the Russian FPE decided to make more decisive interventions in Ukraine. The Russian Federation, which emerged as the successor state to the Soviet Union – albeit much smaller and weaker – faced significant internal hurdles brought about by the chaos of the early 1990s, which forced it to initially acquiesce to the emergent unipole of the new system, the United States.⁵⁷ Only with the arrival of Putin as president in 2000, coupled with economic prosperity – largely based off high global fossil fuel prices – and a semblance of social stability, did Russia's capacity to think about pursuing a more assertive foreign policy return.⁵⁸ At the very least, the transition from bipolarity and Russia's eventual return as an assertive regional great power (with a focus on its near abroad) are structural factors which have theoretical ramifications when it comes forwarding a Type-I-inspired neoclassical realist theory. This is because Russia entered the mid-2000s in an unbalanced structural setting and, to borrow the Waltz quote used by Schweller: 'as nature abhors a vacuum, so international

⁵⁶Vladimir Putin, 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation', President of Russia, 24 February 2022, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

⁵⁷Nicholas Ross Smith, *EU–Russian Relations and the Ukraine Crisis* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016).

⁵⁸Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), pp. 1–175.

politics abhors unbalanced power.⁵⁹ It is clear that in the post–Cold War setting, Russia has been struggling to assert itself as a great power and has found itself feeling ostracised and disrespected by the West.⁶⁰ This is partly because the system has been (and remains, albeit to a lesser extent) dominated by the primacy of the United States.⁶¹ Indeed, in his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, Putin talked of the problem with unipolarity, describing it as ‘one center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making’ and that he was ‘convinced that we have reached that decisive moment when we must seriously think about the architecture of global security.’⁶²

In response to the systemic pressures emanating from American hegemony, Russia has generally adopted a strategy of multipolarism. Multipolarism is a strategy aimed at returning international politics towards something closer to multipolarity or, at the very least, a more competitive international environment.⁶³ Although Russia no longer had the power to do this alone, it hoped it could emerge as the leader of a group of like-minded states that were all similarly dissatisfied with unipolarity.⁶⁴ Multipolarism did not become a clear strategy for Russia under Putin until the mid-2000s, particularly after the Kremlin became concerned by apparent Western meddling in its near abroad during the Color Revolutions wave.⁶⁵ A global ramification of this strategy can be found in the creation of the BRICS grouping – a group of five ‘emerging powers’: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The BRICS group largely came to fruition due to a mutual perception amongst its members that the unipolar system was unfairly tilted towards American interests.⁶⁶

Beyond the global scope of structure, it is important to recognise that states are typically more sensitive towards the power capabilities of rivals that are geographically close to it.⁶⁷ At the height of American hegemony in the first decade of the post–Cold War setting, the importance of regions as systemic stimuli in their own right was largely pacified by the United States’ desire and ability to play international sheriff.⁶⁸ However, as the gap between the United States and the rest coupled with the United States’ fatigue with being an omnipresent global power, the power dynamics of regions have become more crucial to understanding how structure is affecting international politics,⁶⁹ evident in the emergence of revisionist regional great powers like China and Russia.⁷⁰ In the case of Russia’s strategic responses to the apparent threat of NATO and the European Union (EU) to their near abroad, both Mouritzen and Wivel and Smith demonstrated that the regional distribution of power was an important systemic factor (more than global power trends) in understanding Russia’s power calculations and actions, in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine respectively.⁷¹

⁵⁹ Kenneth Waltz, ‘Structural realism after the Cold War’, *International Security*, 25:1 (2000), pp. 5–41, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560372>; Schweller, ‘Unanswered threats’, p. 163.

⁶⁰ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, pp. 1–175.

⁶¹ Nicholas Ross Smith, *A New Cold War? Assessing the Current US–Russia Relationship* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁶² Vladimir Putin, ‘Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy’, President of Russia, 10 February 2007, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/24034>.

⁶³ Smith, *EU–Russian Relations and the Ukraine Crisis*, pp. 1–100.

⁶⁴ Mark Katz, ‘Primakov redux? Putin’s pursuit of “multipolarism” in Asia’, *Demokratizatsiya*, 14:1 (2006), pp. 144–52.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Ross Smith, ‘The EU and Russia’s conflicting regime preferences in Ukraine: Assessing regime promotion strategies in the scope of the Ukraine crisis’, *European Security*, 24:4 (2015), pp. 525–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2015.1027768>.

⁶⁶ Michael Glosny, ‘China and the BRICs: A real (but limited) partnership in a unipolar world’, *Polity*, 42:1 (2009), pp. 100–12.

⁶⁷ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1–12.

⁶⁸ Nicholas Ross Smith, ‘When hedging goes wrong: Lessons from Ukraine’s failed hedge of the EU and Russia’, *Global Policy*, 11:5 (2020), pp. 588–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12862>.

⁶⁹ Ole Wæver, ‘International leadership after the demise of the last superpower: System structure and stewardship’, *Chinese Political Science Review*, 2:4 (2017), pp. 452–76, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-017-0086-7>; William Wohlforth, ‘Polarity and international order: Past and future’, in Nina Græger (ed.), *Polarity in International Relations: Past, Present, Future* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 411–24.

⁷⁰ Angela Stent, *Russia and China: Axis of Revisionists?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2020).

⁷¹ Hans Mouritzen and Anders Wivel, *Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012); Smith, *EU–Russian Relations and the Ukraine Crisis*.

At the regional level for Russia, the changing power dynamics of Eastern Europe brought about by the expansion of NATO and the EU – coupled with Russia’s growing assertiveness – could be best characterised as a transition to a regional setting with a bipolar distribution of power between Russia and the West.⁷² Add in that there was no agreed-upon security architecture in the aftermath of the Cold War, and such changing regional power dynamics engineered a regional situation beset by rising fear and paranoia and, as a by-product, competition and conflict.⁷³ Importantly, the Kremlin noted that NATO and the EU were undertaking proactive steps to further enhance their regional power – against Russia – through interacting with the countries of Russia’s near abroad, most notably Ukraine. Such an outcome was clearly deemed not only undesirable but, judging by Russia’s subsequent actions in Georgia and Ukraine, unacceptable.

In this vein, Russia was not balancing against Ukraine itself, but rather against Western economic and military approximation with Ukraine, to reduce the prospect of a full-scale Ukrainian westward turn. Some of the evidence of such westward turn includes Ukraine joining NATO’s Enhanced Opportunity Partners Program in 2020, a programme which involves frequent discussions on security issues, participation in interoperability initiatives, and close collaboration during periods of crisis; the GBP 1.7 billion 2021 memorandum with the UK for an arms deal; and the 2021 US–Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership.⁷⁴ This indicates that even after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and its support to pro-Russia separatists in Ukraine, Ukraine’s foreign and defence policy was drifting away from Russia towards the West, leading Putin to conclude that the balancing behaviour before the invasion was not enough. Hence, there was still underbalancing until 2022, although less underbalancing than before 2014, when Russia was struggling (against the EU and, to a certain extent, NATO) to bring Ukraine into its orbit of influence.

Consequently, Russia’s relative power position both internationally and regionally acted as the critical independent variable which drove its FPE to alter its balancing behaviour.

Yet one question remains unanswered: was Russia’s increasing state capacity in the mid-2000s directly converted into military modernisation?

Conditional mechanisms behind Russia’s defence policy: The Georgian seismic event and the origins of ‘new look’ and GPV-2020

Between 1993 and 2008, military reforms in Russia had no meaningful results.⁷⁵ They were mostly limited to downsizing military personnel and equipment without addressing the larger military system and organisational structure.⁷⁶ During that period, modernisation efforts often failed to achieve any significant change and were often abandoned. The State Armaments Programme 2000–2010 (GPV-2010), for example, enacted in 2000, had to be abandoned for failing to meet most of the programme’s stated objectives.⁷⁷ GPV-2015, announced in 2006, also fell short of accomplishing any notable success in modernising Russia’s armed forces. Another prime example of how Russia struggled to execute its military reform plans was the Targeted Federal Programme (TFG). Launched under Putin and implemented between 2003 and 2007 to transform Russia’s conscript-based army into a contract-based professional force, the TFG was conceived to align one combined

⁷²Nicholas Ross Smith and Grant Dawson, ‘Mearsheimer, realism, and the Ukraine war’, *Analyse & Kritik*, 44:2 (2022), pp. 175–200, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/auk-2022-2023>.

⁷³Andrey Sushentsov and William Wohlforth, ‘The tragedy of US–Russian relations: NATO centrality and the revisionists’ spiral’, *International Politics*, 57 (2020), pp. 427–50, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00229-5>; Smith, ‘When hedging goes wrong’.

⁷⁴Elias Götz and Per Ekman, ‘Russia’s war against Ukraine: Context, causes, and consequences’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 71:3 (2024), pp. 193–205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2024.2343640>.

⁷⁵Alexei G. Arbatov, ‘Military reform in Russia: Dilemmas, obstacles, and prospects’, *International Security*, 22:4 (1998), pp. 83–134; Kirill Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics within the Russian Military* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021).

⁷⁶Thomas Braun, ‘The Russian military in 2020’, *Connections*, 11:2 (2020), pp. 67–78.

⁷⁷Zoltan Barany, ‘Civil–military relations and institutional decay: Explaining Russian military politics’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60:4 (2008), pp. 581–604.

unit in each service branch with the new proposed system. However, the programme was widely considered a failure and could not realise its goals.⁷⁸ Moreover, from 1992 to 2008, no significant purchases of modern or updated legacy weapons were made for general-purpose forces. As a result, the army was equipped with obsolete and outdated weapons and military equipment. In the air force, about 55 per cent of the total equipment was out of commission during this period.⁷⁹

In the aftermath of Russia's intervention against Georgia in 2008, Serdyukov acknowledged the severe backwardness afflicting the Russian armed forces: only 10 per cent of the Russian military's equipment could be considered modern, a share which GPV-2020 would seek to increase to 70 per cent.⁸⁰ Hence, even if from 2004 to 2008 Russia experienced increasing oil and gas revenues, improved its tax collection system, strengthened the federal government over regions, and enhanced its extractive capacity, the Russian FPE did not pursue defence modernisation programmes to build up the state's military capabilities.⁸¹ Therefore, increased state capacity did not go hand in hand with military capability building before the Georgian shock.

Despite Russia's quick victory in the five-day, August 2008 war against Georgia, the Russian FPE acknowledged the flawed performance of the Russian military during that campaign.⁸² Military officers and analysts highlighted the lack of unified command in the Russian armed forces, equipment shortages, communication flaws, and the dearth of GLONASS space systems to enable the employment of satellite-guided projectiles or precision-guided missiles during the Georgian War.⁸³ The Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov, for example, was very critical of the Russian military's backwardness preceding the war with Georgia: he said that for the past 20 years, Russian military leadership had failed to bring the art of war to a modern level and had continued to cultivate outdated ideas about the nature of modern warfare, relying on a mass army and the purchase of obsolete weaponry from the industry.⁸⁴ Russia won against Georgia through sheer mass rather than by employing advanced weapons systems that resulted from military modernisation programmes.⁸⁵ Despite Russia's victory, the 2008 Georgian War exposed structural weaknesses of the Russian military which indicated that it was not ready for a high-intensity conflict on the modern battlefield against a technologically and organisationally advanced adversary. For this reason, the Georgia incident can be described as a seismic event.

By October 2008, seeking to address the flaws displayed by Russia's armed forces in Georgia, defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov announced a far-reaching package of reforms, named 'New Look', intending to modernise the Russian military.⁸⁶ The package's goals included the replacement of conscript sergeants with professionals and the abandonment of the division as the building block

⁷⁸Nadja Douglas, 'Civil–military relations in Russia: Conscript vs. contract army, or how ideas prevail against functional demands', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27:4 (2014), pp. 511–32.

⁷⁹Mikhail Barabanov, Konstantin Makienko, and Ruslan Pukhov, *Military Reform: Toward the New Look of the Russian Army* (Moscow: Valdai Club, 2012), p. 5.

⁸⁰Bettina Renz, 'Russian military capabilities after 20 years of reform', *Survival*, 56:3 (2014), pp. 61–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.920145>.

⁸¹Dirk-Jan Kraan, Daniel Bergvall, Ian Hawkesworth, Valentina Kostyleva, and Matthias Witt, 'Budgeting in Russia', *OECD Journal on Budgeting*, 8:2 (2008), pp. 1–58; Nadia Sabitovaa and Chulpan Shavaleyevaa, 'Oil and gas revenues of the Russian Federation: Trends and prospects', *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 27 (2015), pp. 423–8, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671\(15\)01016-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(15)01016-3).

⁸²Stephen J. Blank and Richard Weitz, 'Introduction. Russian military studies: A call for action', in Stephen J. Blank and Richard Weitz (eds), *The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow: Essays in Memory of Mary Fitzgerald* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2010), pp. 1–17; Dmitri Trenin, 'The revival of the Russian military: How Moscow reloaded', *Foreign Affairs*, 95:3 (2016), pp. 23–9.

⁸³Dale Herspring, 'Is military reform in Russia for "real"? Yes, but', in Stephen J. Blank and Richard Weitz (eds), *The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow: Essays in Memory of Mary Fitzgerald* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2010), pp. 151–91.

⁸⁴Kirill Shamiev, 'Civil–military relations and Russia's post-Soviet military culture: A belief system analysis', *Armed Forces & Society*, 49:2 (2023), pp. 252–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X211062932>.

⁸⁵Tor Bukkvoll, 'Russia's military performance in Georgia', *Military Review*, 89:6 (2009), pp. 57–62.

⁸⁶Mark Galeotti, 'Reform of the Russian military and security apparatus: An investigator's perspective', in Stephen J. Blank (ed.), *Can Russia Reform? Economic, Political, and Military Perspectives* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2012), pp. 61–105.

of the ground forces, replacing it with more flexible and smaller brigades.⁸⁷ Two years later, on 31 December 2010, President Medvedev signed the decree on the State Armaments Programme 2011–2020 (GPV-2020). GPV-2020 sought to upgrade military equipment annually by 11 per cent and increase the share of modern weaponry to 70 per cent by 2020.⁸⁸ Russia allocated 20 trillion rubles (or about \$348 billion USD in September 2017 exchange rates) for the initiative, a value above prior levels of spending in other military capability-building programs.⁸⁹ These modernisation efforts were unprecedented in character and set the conditions for Russia to improve its military capabilities and thus pursue a more assertive policy in Ukraine, which ultimately culminated in the 2022 full-scale invasion of the state.

Overall, increases in Russia's state capacity during the early 2000s were not directly followed by military capability building. It took the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War for Russia's political elites to undertake sweeping, comprehensive military reforms and modernisation efforts to strengthen the material capabilities and organisational efficiency of the Russian armed forces.⁹⁰ This is more consistent with a conditional model of state capacity neoclassical realism than the long-standing and mainstream direct-causation explanations. The objective of the following section is not to analyse the performance of Russia's forces in Ukraine, but instead, to lay out Russia's military capability-building efforts leading up to the 2022 invasion, illustrating the new model of state capacity neoclassical realism.

New Look, GPV-2020, and Russia's balancing in Ukraine: A conditional state capacity neoclassical realist account

Before the 2014 intervention, Russia constantly struggled with the West for political and economic influence in Ukraine.⁹¹ Moscow fundamentally sought to avoid the prospects of Ukraine's NATO and EU membership. The prospect of NATO membership became an issue which was first openly put onto the table at the 2008 Bucharest Summit.⁹² Regarding the EU, while it professed an 'everything but institutions' model for interacting with Ukraine, the prospect of Ukraine signing an Association Agreement (with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) was seen in Moscow as tantamount to a membership pathway.⁹³ Given that this article is only concerned with the hard balancing aspect of Russia's response, the EU aspect of Russia's behaviour is not engaged with.

If Ukraine were to ever fall out of Russia's orbit and become a NATO member, Russia would not only be more vulnerable to an allegedly hostile military alliance on its borders but also lose access to Crimea, an outlet to the Black Sea that provides easy access to seaports, shipping routes, and sea lanes of communication, constituting a possible power projection platform.⁹⁴ Once the

⁸⁷ Bettina Renz, 'Russian responses to the changing character of war', *International Affairs*, 95:4 (2019), pp. 817–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz100>.

⁸⁸ Julian Cooper, *Russia's State Armament Programme to 2020: A Quantitative Assessment of Implementation 2011–2015* (Kista: Swedish Defence Research Agency [FOI], 2016), pp. 1–21; Marcel De Haas, *Russia's Military Reforms: Victory after Twenty Years of Failure?* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2011), p. 21.

⁸⁹ Andrew Radin, Lynn E. Davis, Edward Geist, et al., *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.–Russia Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), p. 33.

⁹⁰ Bettina Renz, 'Russian military reform: Prospects and problems', *The RUSI Journal*, 155:1 (2010), pp. 58–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071841003683476>.

⁹¹ Hiski Haukkala, 'From cooperative to contested Europe? The conflict in Ukraine as a culmination of a long-term crisis in EU–Russia relations', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 23:1 (2015), pp. 25–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2014.1001822>.

⁹² Serhii Plokhyy and M. E. Sarotte, 'The shoals of Ukraine: Where American illusions and great-power politics collide', *Foreign Affairs*, 99:1 (2020), pp. 81–95.

⁹³ Smith, *EU–Russian Relations and the Ukraine Crisis*, pp. 1–50.

⁹⁴ Elias Götz, 'Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine policy, 1991–present', *Contemporary Politics*, 22:3 (2016), pp. 301–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201312>.

risks aggravated by the overthrow of former president Yanukovich and with the instant commitment of the new acting president, Oleksandr Turchynov, to promoting further integration with Europe, Russia adopted balancing measures by annexing Crimea (securing its military foothold in Ukraine) and backing separatist militias in the Donetsk and Luhansk.⁹⁵ By the time Russia annexed Crimea, some fruits of GPV-2020 were already notable. Advances in mobility were demonstrated during that brief campaign, when air assault troops (VDV) units acted swiftly and in cooperation with other rapid reaction forces from the special forces' reconnaissance brigades and naval infantry.⁹⁶ It is worth remembering that coordination among forces and command structures was one of the main shortcomings underlying Russia's performance in the 2008 war against Georgia. Also, VDV units, naval infantry forces, and the Spetsnaz (special forces) tested the Ratnik field suit in Crimea. The Ratnik outfit comprises a voice, data, and video communication system, including a GLONASS satellite navigation module. This development was largely driven by the experience in Georgia, where officers had to resort to civilian cell phones or, when signals from the US GPS satellite system were reportedly shut off, the use of motorcycle couriers to send orders.⁹⁷ Furthermore, Russia provided Ukrainian separatists with small arms and small-calibre ammunition, grenade launchers, mortars, and drones.⁹⁸

In general, Russia's balancing policy in Ukraine before 2022 was supported by more modern military systems than those which were employed in Georgia. Yet the key improvements in terms of military modernisation were more notable in the years following the 2014 annexation of Crimea.⁹⁹ By the end of 2017, Russian officials could credibly claim a 59.9 per cent modernisation rate across the services of the Russian armed forces.¹⁰⁰ At the end of 2019, the modernisation rate for all forces was 67 per cent.¹⁰¹ This rate reflected advances in different fronts: the modernisation of Soviet-era air platforms using improved munitions, sensors, and engines; improvements in electronics, including communications and fire control systems, as well as the increased use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to enhance battlefield intelligence; new and updated-legacy air defence systems, such as the S-400 and the modernised S-300s; and the modernisation of space-based systems. By the end of 2017, at least 85 Russian military satellites were in orbit, whereas Russia did not have a single active optical reconnaissance satellite during the 2008 war against Georgia.¹⁰² Moreover, the acquisition of the Iskander-M missile system was a significant upgrade for Russia's ground forces, increasing Russian missile brigades' operational range to up to 500 km.¹⁰³

As Table 1 shows, Russia employed multiple modern (new designs and updated-legacy systems) capabilities in Syria.¹⁰⁴ Some of these capabilities include the Iskander-M missile and electronic warfare (EW) platforms, such as the helicopter-carried Richag-AV radar and sonar jamming system as well as the Krasukha-4 truck-mounted radio emitter, which is capable of jamming radar

⁹⁵Roy Allison, 'Russian "deniable" intervention in Ukraine: How and why Russia broke the rules', *International Affairs*, 90:6 (2014), pp. 1255–97.

⁹⁶Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), pp. 48–72.

⁹⁷Mark Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army, 1992–2016* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2017), pp. 18–27.

⁹⁸Conflict Armament Research, *Weapons of the War in Ukraine: A Three-Year Investigation of Weapons Supplies into Donetsk and Luhansk* (London: Conflict Armament Research, 2021), pp. 10–130.

⁹⁹Richard Connolly and Cecile Sendstad, 'Russian rearmament', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 65:3 (2018), pp. 143–60.

¹⁰⁰NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 'Russian Military Modernisation: Challenges Ahead for NATO Allies' (NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Defence and Security Committee, 2020), available at: <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2020-12/030%20DSC%2020%20E%20rev.%202%20fin%20-%20RUSSIAN%20MILITARY%20MODERNISATION.pdf>.

¹⁰¹European Parliamentary Research Service, 'Russia's Armed Forces: Defence Capabilities and Policy', European Parliament (2021), available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689370/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)689370_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689370/EPRS_BRI(2021)689370_EN.pdf).

¹⁰²Anton Lavrov, *Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), pp. 3–26.

¹⁰³Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, and Brian Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), pp. 63–5.

¹⁰⁴Michael Simpson, Adam R. Grissom, Christopher A. Mouton, John P. Godges, and Russell Hanson, *Road to Damascus: The Russian Air Campaign in Syria, 2015 to 2018* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), pp. 4–56.

Table 1 Modern/updated capabilities employed in Syria. Source: authors.

Platform	Platform type
Krasukha-4	electronic warfare system
Richag-AV	electronic warfare system
Moscow-1	electronic warfare system
Su-35/S Flanker-E	aircraft
Su-57 Felon	aircraft
Su-30SM Flanker-H	aircraft
Mil Mi-35M Hind-F	aircraft
Updated S-300	air defence system
S-400	air defence system
Orlan-10	unmanned aerial vehicle
Granat-1	unmanned aerial vehicle
Iskander-M	ballistic missile
Kalibr	Cruise missile

signals and controlling channels for drones and has a range of up to 300 km.¹⁰⁵ Russia used the Kalibr missile from air, surface vessel, and submarine launch platforms in 2015 and 2016 for the first time.¹⁰⁶ The fifth-generation Su-57 fighter jet was also employed in Syria for limited test flights in early 2018. Despite the low usage of precision-guided munitions by Russia in the Syrian campaign, the overall rate of success of general-purpose non-precision weapons – such as missiles, artillery pieces, mortars and howitzers, and thermobaric weapons – was positive, largely due to the conditions provided by intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and command and control (C2) segments. On average, by 2018, there had been 60 to 70 reconnaissance, strike, and radio-electronic suppression UAVs over Syria, and all branches involved were using this fleet more extensively on the operational-tactical level.¹⁰⁷ Many of these UAVs allowed Russia to conduct successful ISR operations, improving the usability of non-precision weapons. Moreover, from 2018 to 2020, Russian air defences and EW systems disabled over 150 enemy drones, and in 2019, Russia neutralised approximately 60 drone-and-missile attacks against its Khmeimim airbase.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, before Russia undertook a full-scale invasion against Ukraine, it had significantly modernised its military forces with new designs and updated-legacy systems. These systems were tested, at a smaller scale, during the annexation of Crimea and employed, at a larger scale, in the Syria campaign.¹⁰⁹ The modernisation programmes resulted from efforts by the Russian FPE to address the military technological and organisational weaknesses that hindered Russia's performance in Georgia. Before Russia translated improved state capacity into military capability

¹⁰⁵Jeremy Chin, 'Russian MoD confirms use of Iskander-M SRBM in Syria', *Missile Threat: Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2018), available at: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/russian-mod-confirms-use-of-iskander-m-srbm-in-syria/>; Anna Varfolomeeva, 'Signaling strength: Russia's real Syria success is electronic warfare against the US', *The Defense Post* (1 May 2018), available at: <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/05/01/russia-syria-electronic-warfare/>.

¹⁰⁶Mason Clark, *The Russian Military's Lessons Learned in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2021), pp. 1–31.

¹⁰⁷Dmitry Adamsky, *Moscow's Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy* (Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2018), pp. 1–20.

¹⁰⁸Antonio Calcara, Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli, Raffaele Marchetti, and Ivan Zaccagnini, 'Why drones have not revolutionized war: The enduring hide-and-seek competition in air warfare', *International Security*, 46:4 (2022), pp. 130–71, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00431.

¹⁰⁹Timothy Thomas, *Russian Lessons Learned in Syria: An Assessment* (McLean, Va: MITRE Center for Technology and National Security, 2020), pp. 3–20; Samuel Bendett, Mathieu Boulègue, Richard Connolly, et al., *Advanced Military Technology in Russia: Capabilities and Implications* (London: Chatham House, 2021), pp. 4–75.

building, poor performance in the Russo-Georgian War, recognition of the need for reforms, and New Look and especially GPV-2020 acted as conditional mechanisms. These mechanisms were the 'bridges' connecting state capacity and military modernisation. Then, capability testing in real-life combat in Ukraine and, to a larger degree, in Syria preceded the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

How does this plausibility probe connect to the causal mechanisms of conditional state capacity neoclassical realism and illustrate this model? To answer this question, a systematic, summarised account of the variables is presented.

First, when it comes to Russia's relative power position (independent variable), Russia acted as a resurgent regional power faced with an eastward-expanding US-led NATO that increasingly penetrated its 'near abroad' and threatened its great-power status, especially in Ukraine. As for state capacity (intervening variable), Russia had rebuilt its state capacity by 2004, as previous research by Elias Götz had found. Nevertheless, it was not until 2008 that the Russian FPE decided to transform its improved state capacity into military modernisation. It took the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, a seismic event (conditional mechanism 1) for Russia's military elite and policymakers to realise that they needed to rebuild and modernise Russian military capabilities. Russia's performance in the war showcased major technological and organisational hurdles affecting the Russian armed forces. The ensuing FPE's reassessment of priorities and needs regarding the state's military capabilities (conditional mechanism 2) led to the New Look reforms and GPV-2020, with Russia's FPE redefining the modernisation priorities for the Russian armed forces and engaging in a capability-building effort. Through the resulting military modernisation (dependent variable 1), Russia acquired new capabilities that encompassed multiple domains ranging from missiles, drones and air defences to EW. Then, Russia undertook capability testing (conditional mechanism 3), that is, tested new equipment and weapons systems, in Ukraine prior to 2022 and in Syria. Finally, the full-scale military action in Ukraine (balancing – dependent variable 2) came after Russia rebuilt its state capacity, modernised military capabilities after the Georgian shock, and tested these capabilities in real combat situations. Russia engaged in a military assault in Ukraine to reclaim some of its declining dominance in the near abroad and balance against the United States and NATO by trying to prevent Ukraine from forging closer ties with the West.

This plausibility probe illustrates that the causal thread from state capacity to military power is not always as direct as presumed, but instead, it may rely on conditional mechanisms. Although direct-causation state capacity neoclassical realism is an useful asset that the new proposed model does not intend to reject altogether, it might miss out on certain causal nuances. If we assume that states directly convert state capacity into military capabilities, the imperative role in some cases of seismic events, military reassessments, and battle-testing will be left out of the understanding of state capacity and balancing. This could give us a misguided picture of reality that is predicated upon the assumption state capacity was transformed into military power in a straightforward sequence.

Conclusion

This article set forth a conditional model of state capacity neoclassical realism and argued that state capacity depends on conditional mechanisms to be converted into military modernisation and lead a state to switch from underbalancing to full-scale balancing. This does not reject the direct-causation model but does propose some amendments to it by showing that the process from state capacity to military capability building, and consequently from underbalancing to balancing, is not always as automatic as implied by previous scholars such as Taliaferro and Götz. The new conditional state capacity model was illustrated through the case study of Russia's post-Georgia military modernisation programmes leading up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The case study not only corroborates the plausibility of the conditional framework of neoclassical realism but also examines the conditional mechanism of capability testing in real-combat situations, in addition to the first two (seismic event and the FPE's reassessment of military capabilities).

This research is located on the Type I spectrum of neoclassical realism and provides an innovative contribution to the understanding of how state capacity and military modernisation drive states' balancing behaviour, more specifically, how they switch from underbalancing to balancing. This advances the comprehension of the complex process by which state capacity is translated into military capabilities, something that had not been captured by the existing literature. The new model offers more case-specific explanatory power, making state capacity neoclassical realism more empirically rigorous. Beforehand, scholars either implied that state capacity was translated into military modernisation and balancing without any further empirical assessment or tended to neglect conditional mechanisms that drive this causal chain.

Further research on conditional neoclassical realism could encompass more case studies and other factors that, for objectivity purposes, our research did not take into account, including the extent to which the bureaucratic politics of military modernisation programmes matters for balancing behaviour. Another possible avenue of research is analysing the conditional mechanisms behind China's state capacity building during and after the Deng Xiaoping era. To what extent did the Sino-Soviet confrontations act as a seismic event that would drive forward the rationale for the rapprochement with the United States and the subsequent reforms? These endeavours would potentially enrich the explanatory power of conditional state capacity neoclassical realism beyond a single case. New efforts to provide more insights into the state capacity literature would enrich the neoclassical realist theoretical portfolio and further develop our grasp of balancing behaviour.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank Muhammed Can, Kirill Shamiev, and Alena Vysotskaya Vieira for their comments and suggestions. This research project stems from the working group 'Power Transition, Balancing and Underbalancing: Case Studies' of the Study and Research Group on International Security (GEPSI).

Funding. Mohammad Eslami's research has been financed by National Funds of the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) within the project UID/00758 and the Research Centre in Political Science, University of Minho/University of Évora.

Conflict of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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