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Abstract

This article employs structural realism indicators to predict the likelihood of a great power war in today's multipolar world. Focusing on key indicators such as changes in the balance of power, alliance systems, military expenditure, and the intensity of competition over strategic resources and regions, the analysis aims to establish a theoretical foundation for assessing the risk of conflict among major powers in Europe and beyond. Drawing on historical precedents and contemporary geopolitical trends, the study evaluates the dynamics of international relations through the structural realist framework. By examining the evolving power structures and strategic behaviors of major states, the article seeks to identify patterns that may indicate an increased risk of great power conflicts. The multifaceted approach integrates both historical insights and current realities, offering a comprehensive perspective on the potential triggers and dynamics of great power wars in the complex landscape of a multipolar world. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the structural factors that may influence the emergence of conflicts among major powers, providing valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and analysts grappling with global security challenges.

Predicting Great Power War in a multipolar world: A structural realist framework

“In the anarchic world of international politics, it’s better to be Godzilla than Bambi.”

John J. Mearsheimer (2001 p. 296))

“The statesman who knowing his instrument, to be ready and seeing war inevitable, hesitates to strike first is guilty of a crime against his country.”

Carl Von Clausewitz “On War”

Two years of a devastating war between Russia and Ukraine have instilled fear among European politicians – from Stockholm and Berlin to Moscow- for a full-scale war in Europe. The British minister of defense stated unambiguously that Europe is “moving from a postwar to a prewar world. “In the background looms the concern that Russia seems to be turning the tide Ukraine combined with a growing panic caused by the prospect of US isolationism with a Trump victory in the upcoming presidential elections (Sabbagh, 2024). Europe appears to be at the precipice of yet another great power war about 80 years after the last one ended in 1945.

Great power wars can have profound and far-reaching consequences for affected nations and societies most vividly witnessed in the total wars of WWI and WW2 that marked pivotal moments in history with lasting impacts on the entire world in terms of human suffering and economic devastation. Furthermore, great power wars can cause structural changes to the international system of states. In the aftermath of WWI – for example - the world witnessed the collapses of the Ottoman, Austria – Hungary and the Russian empire. With such high stakes and the current state of great power rivalry and tension there is a significant risk that we will soon witness the eruption of a world war that possibly could overshadow the total wars in the first half of 20th Century.

Predicting the outbreak of a great power war is a complex and challenging endeavor. In the last few years there have been several initiatives and projects that examine historical case studies to identify patterns and dynamics that may contribute to the escalation of tensions between rising and established powers. Organizations like the Eurasia Group, Stratfor, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) provide geopolitical forecasting and risk assessments that consider intrastate and interstate conflicts across the world based on complex quantitative and qualitative methodologies for their government and non-governmental clients. Furthermore, Defense and Security Think Tanks such as RAND Corporation, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) undertake research and analysis on security and defense issues, including the potential for great power wars.

However, none of the above-mentioned frameworks are grounded in any specific theory of international relations and while some initiatives such as the Harvard Thucydides Trap Project, led by political scientist Graham Allison, incorporates realist notions of power dynamics and competition, the analysis goes beyond structural realism including factors such as decision-making processes and individual agency (Harvard University Thucydides Trap Project).

This essay will present and explain a framework to assess the risk of great power war in a multipolar world consisting of five key Great Power War indicators and their corresponding hypothesis and

assumptions. The analytical framework is grounded in the international relations theory of structural realism and key variables that determine the outbreak of war such as the distribution of power between states and alliances. Structural realism perhaps more than any other International Relations theory, claims to be informed by practices and derived from a historical pattern of behavior of great powers in the international system of states. For that reason, each indicator will be explained and substantiated by historical examples of great power wars. Finally, the essay endeavors to put the indicators to the test by assessing the risk of a great power war in Europe in the near future.

Theoretical frameworks provide a structured and systematic way of understanding and analyzing great power competition and conflict and identify and understand the root causes of international conflicts, including the factors that contribute to the outbreak of wars. By examining historical patterns and systemic forces, theories offer insights into the underlying dynamics that may lead to conflict. Theories therefore provide a context for understanding the behavior of states and great powers within the international system. They offer lenses through which to interpret the actions and motivations of states, helping to predict how nations might respond to certain stimulus or changes in the global environment (Smith, 2013, pp. 8-9).

The purpose of the framework is to help policymakers anticipate the consequences of their actions and make informed choices that align with broader strategic goals. More concretely, it will assist in assessing the risk of great power conflicts by providing a systematic approach to evaluating factors such as changes in power distributions, alliance structures, and the impact of emerging powers and resource competition. The framework also enables analysts, governments, and non-governmental stakeholders such as peace activists and humanitarian organizations to identify potential flashpoints and areas of instability. And thus, prepare for actions and response plans.

Structural realism and its theoretical underpinnings.

The underlying assumptions of structural realism are the anarchic nature of the international system (the absence of supreme authority); all states possess some offensive military capability; states can never be certain about the intentions of other states; survival is the overarching goal; and states are rational actors consistently assessing how to survive in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp.32-34). In this context, war indicators take on added significance as they reflect the underlying power dynamics among states that contribute to the potential for conflict. Societal and cultural factors, on the other hand, are viewed as secondary to the distribution of power. While such characteristics can shape state behavior to some extent, realists argue that they are ultimately subordinate to the pursuit of power and security. For that reason, the great power indicators presented here exclusively pertain to the balance of power in the international system of states (Mearsheimer, 2010, pp.381-396)¹.

Today the international system of states is multi-polar, where power is distributed among multiple major actors or states, and no single state or alliance dominates the others. As opposed to unipolar or bipolar systems the multipolar system will see greater imbalances of powers since more great powers means more actors – with changing capabilities and intentions opens also up for higher chances of miscalculations that can lead to war (Mearsheimer, 2010, pp.381-396). Unbalanced multipolarity increases the risk of war since power imbalances within the system tend to increase tensions and competition as states seek to redress perceived inequities or counter the influence of dominant powers. The current great powers in the international system are USA, China, and Russia in sequence of power. The two latter powers have since the war in Libya in 2011 developed into strategic partners in military, political and economic terms (Kvernmo, 2019, p.17) that could *rewind the* world back to the Cold war era of bipolarity. This means that US and the other members of the international system need to assess

¹ Political decision-making theory can provide micro foundations for structural realism by examining how individual leaders interpret and respond to systemic pressures. It explores how decision-makers perceive threats, calculate costs and benefits, and navigate the constraints of the international structure. More on this in Robert Jervis "Perception and Misperception in International Politics" (1976)

and monitor the China and Russia individually as well as their combined forces. Russian calculations when initiating the war in Ukraine in 2022 were probably informed by the level of expected support from Beijing (Ni and Roth, 2022).² Whether or not Putin received a blank cheque from Xi in Beijing prior to the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the situations resonates with a similar unbalanced multipolar situation when Germany gave a blank cheque to Austria Hungary in July 1914 to attack Serbia that spun out of control embroiling Europe and the entire world in a total war. Likewise, Stalin supported Mao's intervention in the Korean war in 1950 while China took a lead on the provision of military, economic and personnel support for Vietcong (Jian, 2010, pp.54-5 and 206-07). Therefore, when assessing the indicators its insufficient to measure the balance of power between two of the great powers back-to-back and necessary to also include their alliance partners in the equation.

Great Power War indicators and the risk of war in Europe

Below each of the five Great Power War indicators will be presented and analysed through the lens of structural realism theory informed by historical case studies. Furthermore, the risk of a great power war in Europe will be assessed based on the current geopolitical situation in Europe. The risk analysis exercise also seeks to demonstrate how the framework can be applied, using the risk values of low, medium, and high risks.

GPW Indicators 1	Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe
Timeframe before a rising power surpasses a regional hegemon	High Risk

Hypothesis: Structural realists emphasize the distribution of power and the relative capabilities of states as key drivers of international relations. The relative power of the individual states – a product of military and economic power and population – varies over time and is constantly being monitored by the other states. For some structural realists' power transitions and in particular the rise and fall of great powers are seen as central factors in shaping the geopolitical landscape and influencing the likelihood of war.

According to the theory of power transition major wars and conflicts are more likely to occur during periods of power transition between great powers. The more imminent a rising power is to overtake an existing hegemon, the higher the likelihood of preemptive strikes from either the revisionist (rising) power or the status quo (hegemonic) power. This theory suggests that as a rising power gains strength and approaches parity or surpasses the dominant power, the potential for conflict and preemptive actions increases since the fear of being overtaken, coupled with the desire to maintain or expand influence, can lead to a heightened risk of conflict as both powers maneuver to secure their positions in the international system (Organski, 1958).

Graham Allison argues that the rising power, motivated by its growing strength and aspirations for a larger global role, challenges the dominant power's position and disrupts the established hierarchy. Allison analyzed sixteen cases in which a major rising power has threatened to displace a major ruling power in the last 500 years and concluded that 12 of these transitions lead to war (Allison, 2017). His research has been further developed and expanded in the ongoing Harvard Thucydides trap project (Harvard Thucydides trap project). The case studies below illustrate how rising powers can lead to great power wars.

² Putin was last in Beijing in February 2022 during the Winter Olympics, right before Russia invaded Ukraine. Both countries at the time declared a "no-limits" partnership. More in Faulconbridge, 2022.

Case studies: WWI and WWII

In the years leading up to the outbreak of WWI, Germany's rapid economic growth and military buildup threatened the existing hegemony of Great Britain. The increasing strength of Germany, combined with its aspiration for a larger global role – a place in the sun - caused alarm not only in London but in the major capitals in Europe (Morris and Murphy, 2004, pp. 111 and 114-5). Fearing Germany's rise and the perceived direct challenge to its status as a global power, Great Britain sought alliances and preemptive strategies to prevent the rise of Germany and maintain its dominant position.

Prior to World War I, Germany experienced significant and higher relative economic growth compared to their European rivals Russia, France and Great Britain. Germany's industrial sector expanded rapidly, especially in sectors such as steel, chemicals, and machinery. Germany overtook Great Britain in its relative share of European Wealth in 1903, however in terms of actual military power France and Germany dominated the European land war theater (Kennedy, 1988, pp.254-9). Still, while their standing armies were of similar size the German (as opposed to the French) reservist armies were combat ready and Germany counted on “superior general staff” and advantages in heavy artillery (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.302). The British army – as opposed to the formidable Royal Navy - was too small and weak to affect the balance of powers on the continent and the Russian – albeit being the largest standing army was fraught with internal weaknesses that became painfully evident in the humiliating defeat against the Japanese army and navy in the Russo – Japanese war in 1904-05 (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 302).

By 1913, Germany was the largest steel-producing country in the world. As a rising power, Germany significantly increased its military spending leading up to World War I. Germany's military spending outpaced that of both France and Russia. As a rising power, Germany significantly increased its military spending leading up to World War I. The German government allocated a considerable portion of its budget to military expenditures, aiming to enhance its military capabilities (Kennedy, 1988, p.273).

Germany's rise as an economic powerhouse and its increasing military capabilities contributed to the shifting power dynamics in Europe and played a significant role in the geopolitical tensions that eventually led to the outbreak of World War I. Germany – as a revisionist power trapped between Great Britain and France to the West and Russia to the East sought the reshape the geopolitical landscape in Europe to better reflect their growing capabilities and interests and this lead to direct confrontation over spheres of influence, resources and strategic interests in Africa and the Middle East before the great power war broke out in Europe in 1914. (Carr, 1939, p.72)

20 years after the end of WWI and the unsuccessful attempt by Wilhelmina Germany and its allies to expand East, South and West, the rise of Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler threatened again the established powers in Europe, particularly Great Britain and France. Germany's aggressive expansionist policies and its growing military capabilities instilled fears in Great Britain and France that again generated a power transition dynamic, leading to the outbreak of World War II as these dominant powers sought to prevent Germany's further rise and maintain their own positions. This time around however the former entente allies decided on the strategy of buck passing until Nazi Germany annexed the entire Czechoslovakia in 1939 and both France and Great Britain opted for a balancing strategy drawing the red line in the sand on Germany's border with Poland (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 307-318).

At this point in time Germany's economic and military might be that of a potential hegemon in Europe and there's not surprising that war broke out the in 1939 when Germany armed forces were superior to those of France. Soviet Union, however, continued buck passing that was formalized in the Ribbentrop – Molotov non-aggression pact that divided Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence (Beevor, 2012, pp.17-21).

Both wars exemplify that in an unbalanced multi-polar world the risk of global war increases the more imminent the take-over the higher the likelihood of preemptive strikes from either the revisionist or status quo power.

Case studies: the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo - Japanese war (1904-05)

The Sino-Japanese War 1894-95 is an example of a power transition conflict in East Asia during the late 19th century. As Japan's rapid modernization and rise as a regional power threatened China's position as the dominant power in the region, tensions escalated, resulting in a conflict between the two nations. Japan's victory in the war marked a significant shift in the power balance in East Asia.

Japan's leaders believed that challenging China's dominance in the region was necessary for Japan to secure its own national interests and ensure its continued growth as a major power (Pyle, 1996, p.196). Meanwhile, China's relative decline in power – largely attributed to foreign interventions in the period popularly referred to as “the century of humiliation” - and its inability to effectively modernize made it vulnerable to Japanese expansionism (Boyle, 1993).

The immediate cause of the Sino-Japanese war was competing territorial claims in Korea, which was considered a vassal state of China. Japan saw Korea as a crucial buffer zone and sought to prevent Chinese influence and potential intervention there (Boyle, 1993). The war resulted in a decisive victory for Japan, and the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed in 1895, ended the conflict. As a result of the treaty, China recognized Korea's independence, ceded Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands to Japan, and granted Japan various trade and territorial concessions. However, following Russia, along with Germany and France, diplomatic intervention Japan was forced to return the Liaodong Peninsula to China, which had been ceded to Japan in the treaty. This intervention frustrated Japan's territorial ambitions, raised tensions with Russia and convinced many in Tokyo that they had to bide their time develop their military might until they could match Western powers (Toshiro, 2004).

Nevertheless, the war marked a shift in the regional power balance and set the stage for Japan's further expansion and influence in the early 20th century and following the Russo – Japanese war in 1904-05 Japan became a regional hegemon in East Asia. While China was a declining power and Japan a rising power, both Russia and Japan were rising powers that sought to expand their influence and territories in East Asia. Russia was primarily interested in securing its maritime access to the Pacific Ocean and expanding its sphere of influence in China's northeastern provinces and Manchuria. Japan, on the other hand, was focused on asserting its position as a regional power and gaining control over Korea, Manchuria, and other parts of China that were considered strategic buffer zones for its security (Bragg, 2021).

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War was a significant turning point in the region's power dynamics. The war showcased Japan's modernized military and naval capabilities and established Japan as the first Asian country to defeat a major European power in a modern war (Bragg, 2021).

These examples demonstrate how the perceived imminence of a rising power overtaking an existing hegemon can increase the likelihood of preemptive strikes or aggressive actions from both the rising and status quo powers. The more impending a rising power is to overtake an existing hegemon the more likely that war will break out between these powers.

Critics of the theory have highlighted overly simplistic assumptions about power dynamics. Gilpin underscores the absence of factors such as economic independence, the impact of ideology and the influence of international institutions in the analysis (1981). Other critics have enumerated instances where power transitions have not led to war. Richard Ned Lebow and Benjamin Valentino produced one of the best-known critical assessments, arguing that basically none of the great power wars they surveyed was generated by a power transition. One, often referred to, example is the U.S.–United Kingdom relationship from the late 19th century through the mid-20th: The United States overtook the United Kingdom as the world's leading power, but the two cooperated to manage the international

system rather than falling into a rivalry. To understand this abnormality, one has to analyze the backdrop of the shifting geopolitical dynamics and emerging global threats in Europe before World War I. While tensions between the two powers spiked in periods, during the Venezuela-Guyana crisis in 1895-96 and the Alaskan border dispute (1899) these matters were resolved through arbitration, the German naval buildup starting in 1890s threat represented a more direct and imminent threat to the British supremacy of the seas. Therefore, Britain backed down from the Guyana and Alaskan claims accepting tacitly US hegemony in the America (Zakaria, 1999, pp.145-46).

Another example that contradicts the theory is an example from the late 15th century as Spain was about to overtake Portugal as the most powerful nation in the region. Through papal intervention the two nations navigated complex diplomatic and geopolitical considerations that ultimately prevented them from going to war. The Pope, Alexander VI played a crucial role in mediating disputes between European powers during this period (Harvard University Thucydides Trap Project, Portugal-Spain Case study) . One could argue that the Pope temporarily and spatially suspended the anarchic state of the international system when he as an impartial arbiter for the two catholic nations settled the dispute in the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 due to the effective and devastating threat of excommunication.

Risks of Great Power War in Europe

Russia being the 8th largest economy in the world are nowhere close to challenge US. However, since 2011 Russia has gradually developed a strong and deep strategic partnership/alliance with China that needs to be included in the balance of power calculations in both Europe and Asia (Kvernmo, 2019, pp.9-11). Although US initiated sanctions to slow down Chinese growth has been successful in short run, US is struggling to balance (with its allies) against Russia in Europe and China in the East.

Russia's strategic ally China will overtake the US economy in 13 years and become the largest economy on earth. According to the Centre for Economic and Business Research (CEBR) China is forecasted to take over the US economy in 2037 delayed from the earlier forecast of 2028. However, there are several structural challenges in the economy, such as demographic and the middle-income trap, which has led IMF to downgrade the growth projections of the country. Nevertheless, in terms of Purchasing Power Parities (PPP) China surpassed the US in 2017 and Russia became Europe's largest and the world's fifth largest economy in 2022 CEBR, 2023. p.10 and 172). In other words, China as a rising power has already overtaken the US in terms of PPP and will soon do so also measured in dollar terms.

Given the strategic partnership/alliance between Russia and China, reinforced by the 2022 war in Ukraine, the joint military and economic power of these two nations affects necessarily the balance of power calculations in the entire Eurasian region (Global Firepower, 2024). The risk of preemptive strikes between revisionist and status quo powers in Europe is therefore high. The fact that US and NATO allies are providing substantial military and economic support to Ukraine and its war against invading Russia, doesn't only raise questions if the former countries are de facto belligerent in the war, but increases the likelihood of a spillover to the territory of European NATO members.

The imminence of rising power overtaking a regional hegemon is an important factor in predicting the outbreak of great power wars. Another indicator, however, will allow for greater precision in predicting the timeframe of such an occurrence. Historically there are many examples where expected future relative power decline has induced great powers to initiate war while the chances of success are still relatively favorable.

GPW Indicators 2	Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe
The level of expected future relative decline of the hegemon and/or rising power(s)	High Risk

Hypothesis: Structural realists argue that states are primarily concerned with relative gains in power or resources compared to other states. When states perceive that their relative power or influence is declining, they may be motivated to take actions, including engaging in conflict, to prevent or reverse this decline before its power wanes any further. The expectation of diminishing power can induce a great power to engage in military aggression or initiate conflict, while it still possesses a relatively favorable balance of power and before this window of opportunity closes, making the prospect of victory more difficult or unlikely. Furthermore, the risk of war is even higher when expected relative decline is combined with the real or perceived isolation or containment efforts from potential adversaries attempting to prevent its rise. The declining power may then initiate military action to disrupt such containment or isolation efforts and attempt to regain or maintain influence (Levy, 1987, p.89).

Case study: Germany's Aggression in World War II

The expectation of further decline and the desire to regain lost territories and resources motivated Germany to initiate military aggression and launch World War II. The Nazi regime faced significant economic challenges, including the aftermath of the Great Depression and the constraints imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler and his supporters believed that aggressive expansionism and acquiring new territories would provide access to resources, markets, and economic opportunities that could alleviate Germany's economic struggles (Henig, 1985, p.30).

Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime in Germany believed that Germany's future relative decline in power in the 1940s. The Hossbach memorandum from 1937 quoted Hitler as stating, "our relative strength would decrease in relation to the rearmament which would by then have been carried out by the rest of the world." Therefore, he argued that Germany would need to initiate the war before the 1943-45 period beyond which could be considered a "waning point of the regime" (History Learning Site, 2023).

Hitler and the Nazi regime saw Germany's future relative decline in power as a pressing issue that needed to be addressed through military means. They aimed to overturn what they perceived as the unjust outcomes of World War I, regain lost territories, and restore Germany's position as a dominant force in Europe. They assessed that the other major powers, such as Britain and France, were not prepared or willing to confront Germany militarily early on, which encouraged them to act swiftly and aggressively (History Learning Site, 2023).

There is ample evidence to suggest that Nazi Germany towards the end of the 1930s were preparing for war and there was an urgency to act before the Western powers and Soviet Union. Simultaneously in East Asia, Japan was faced by a similar predicament.

Case study: Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Japan faced the prospect of relative decline compared to Western powers, particularly the United States, which imposed an embargo on strategic resources and oil.

The US demanded the Japanese withdrawal from China as a condition to relax the economic embargo and faced with the need to secure resources for its military and industrial ambitions, Japan launched a preemptive strike on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941, seeking to gain an advantage and prevent further containment (Saburo, 1968, p. 133).

President Hara explained Japan's option in the Privy Council 2 November 1941: "It is impossible, from the standpoint of our present political situation and of our self-preservation, to accept all the American demands. On the other hand, we cannot let the present situation continue. If we miss the present opportunity to go to war, we will have to submit to American dictation. Therefore, I recognize that it is inevitable that we must decide to start a war against the United States. I will put my trust in what I have

been told, namely that things will go well in the early part of the war; and that although will experience increasing difficulties as the war progresses, there is some prospect of success". Hence the attack on Pearl Harbor was a rationally calculated risk that a great power was willing to assume to break with the perceived encirclement by hostile western powers and where the only other option was the inevitable slow decline if Japan had accepted the US demands (Storry, 1979).

The economic embargo placed on Japan as a result of its expansion into Indochina would be fatal in the long term for Japan. The Japanese could not sustain the war in China if their key war supplies were cut off. Therefore, a war of conquest to gain and ensure resources from the European colonies seemed to be the only option. However, opinion in Japan was divided on the question of expanding the war. Some argued that Japan could withdraw its forces from Indochina and thus get the embargo lifted. Others wanted no retreat and did not view the USA as a real danger to their ambition.

The Japanese Admiral Nagano belonged to the latter group. In September 1941 made known the following analysis of the dilemma faced by the land of the rising sun. "Japan was like a patient suffering from a serious illness ... Should he be left alone without an operation, there was a danger of a gradual decline. An operation, while it might be dangerous, would still offer some hope of saving his life ... the Army General Staff was in favour of putting hope in diplomatic negotiations, but ... in the case of failure, a decisive operation would have to be performed" (Overy, 2009, p.342).

These examples demonstrate how expectations of relative decline can be seen as an incentive for initiating war sooner, driven by perceptions of weakened adversaries, opportunities for territorial expansion, and the desire to maintain or regain influence in the face of anticipated decline.

Before WWII, both Germany and Japan were rising powers that feared the prospects of future relative decline. Each country decided to initiate preemptive strikes on the Soviet Union and the US respectively. Furthermore, the rise of the Axis powers corresponded with changes in the great military alliances and contributed to a major change in the balance of powers, increasing the likelihood of war.

Risk of Great Power War in Europe

The case studies above demonstrate that countries may retain a strong military posture even while the economic fundamentals are starting to wither. A future decline can induce great powers to take greater risks to expand and consolidate their power before it's too late. As Hal Brands suggests: "military power is often a lagging indicator of a country's trajectory "and while the demographic crisis and the mid income trap is looming in the background the display of military might can be used to obfuscate the incontrovertible truth of a shaky bottom line of the Chinese economy, a *"great leap backwards"* (Brands, 2022)

A report from the US National Intelligence Council projected that "Russia is likely to remain a disruptive power for much or all of the next two decades even as its material capabilities decline relative to other major players. " The report added that "Russia's advantages, including a sizable conventional military, weapons of mass destruction, energy and mineral resources, an expansive geography, demographics, and a willingness to use force overseas, will enable it to continue playing the role of spoiler and power broker in the post-Soviet space, and at times farther afield. Finally, the report suggested that reduced European energy reliance on Russia would curb future revenues as the world is transitioning to renewable sources of energy and thus erode the financial backbone of Russia's geopolitical position (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021). This was before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and although the positive short-term effects on oil and gas prices have compensated for renewed and expanded economic sanctions from Western countries, the war has effectively fast-tracked the European phasing out of Russian oil and gas.

Both China and Russia are facing a future economic and military decline and on top of this are starting to feel the teeth of US led western sanctions, perceived to be containment efforts to slow down their rise and provoke a regime change (Buckley, 2023). Hence the contemporary great power competition is

qualitatively different from the run up to the wars in 1914 and 1939. While Wilhelminian Germany was a latecomer in the race for colonial empire and felt that France and Great Britain blocked their “place in the sun” there were no concerted effort to deliberately hinder Germany's economic growth prior to the war. Furthermore, although the Versailles treaty imposed heavy reparations on Germany and placed limitations on its military, territory, and economy prior to the outbreak of WWII, the Western powers was focused on domestic concerns and recovery from the Great Depression rather than actively seeking to hamper Germany's growth.

In conclusion, both China and Russia are facing a future economic and military decline for internal and external structural factors such as demographics. In addition, they are faced with a coalition of states that imposing sanctions on their economies explicitly to undermine their economies and thus their military potential. Therefore, perhaps even more than the revisionist powers in WWI and WWII China and Russia may perceive that there are no other options than war to change a trajectory that threatens their survival as states.

Europe is faced with another threat to the balance of power on the continent: changes in the military alliance systems.

GPW Indicators 3	Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe
Changes in great power military alliances	High Risk

Hypothesis: Changes in alliances can significantly impact the risks of war, as they alter the geopolitical landscape and can shift power dynamics between states. Shifts in alliances can indicate a changing balance of power, increase tensions between adversaries and potentially increase the risk of war. When states perceive shifts in the distribution of power or threats, they may form or realign alliances to counterbalance their adversaries, potentially heightening tensions and creating a more volatile security environment. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, which included a secret agreement to divide Eastern Europe. The Pact between the ideological adversaries took France and Great Britain by surprise and allowed Hitler to avoid a two-front war and focus on the invasion of Poland, which triggered the start of World War II. The pact demonstrated how unexpected alliances can radically shift the geopolitical landscape.

New alliances formed to counter new threats may result in increased tensions and heightened competition between rival powers. This can lead to a security dilemma³, where each side perceives the other's actions as threatening and responds with further militarization. The German – British naval race combined with Germany’s relative economic growth and Russia’s military defeat pushed Great Britain to leave its splendid isolationism and establish the entente cordiale with Russia and France to balance against Germany (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.213). Furthermore, after the end of the Cold War, NATO expanded to include several countries from Eastern Europe, including Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Russia viewed NATO's enlargement as a security threat and a breach of understandings reached after the Cold War. The expansion of NATO – also reflected in the intervention in Libya in 2011 - contributed to increased tensions between Russia and the West, leading to concerns over potential military confrontations and the evolution of a strategic alliance between Moscow and Beijing (Kvermo, 2019). Similarly, the renewal of the Reassurance Treaty of 1887 between Russia and Germany failed since both France and Russia feared the growing German power and the threat this represented for their security. This is why Russia and France started negotiating their alliance from 1890 onwards. Kaiser

³ Walt (2022) emphasizes the security dilemma as a key factor influencing alliances and war. The security dilemma refers to a situation where states' efforts to enhance their own security can inadvertently reinforcing the fears of the other, leading to a spiral of mistrust and potential conflict. Alliances can be seen as a way to mitigate the security dilemma by providing reassurance and enhancing deterrence.

Willhelm II's aggressive foreign policy started after this point and the establishment of the entente can therefore not be attributed to Germany's foreign policy but rather concerns in Paris and St. Petersburg, about the rapid shift in the balance of power in favor of Germany on the European continent.

Changes in alliances can reflect a country's evolving geopolitical interests. For example, a nation might realign its alliances to pursue new economic opportunities, access resources, or secure military advantages. These shifts can create tensions and competition with other countries in the region or globally. NATO and most western politicians and media appear to categorically discard the notion that Russia might perceive NATO expansion eastwards and inclusion of new members such as Sweden and Finland as existential threats. Aggressive behavior is not necessarily rooted in aggressive motivations but is likely to be interpreted as such when states or alliances perceive their own security enhancing measures as purely benevolent. In the context of the war in Ukraine, a Russian hostile reaction to NATO expansion is interpreted as part of an aggressive power maximizing plan which only can be dealt with effectively through counterforce. Western politicians seem not only to be ignoring the security dilemma but also interpret Russian foreign policy as an extension of domestic policies and attributed to an aggressive and paranoid leader akin to Adolf Hitler (Walt, 2022). While structural realists consider states as black boxes – most analysts appear to not draw a distinction between these two spheres and hence points to Russia's foreign policy as an extension of Putin's illiberal domestic policies thus reaching the conclusion that any durable solution of the Ukraine war would necessarily include a change in the Russian political leadership. Similar demands preceded NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 and Western approach to the Syrian crisis the same year (Kvernmo, 2019).

In the event of a localized conflict involving alliance members, there is a risk that the conflict could escalate and involve other alliance partners. This escalation can occur due to mutual defense commitments or out of fear of being left isolated in a broader conflict. The interconnected nature of alliances can inadvertently draw multiple states into a war that initially involved a specific set of actors. Commitments within alliances can escalate conflicts when one member becomes involved in a dispute, and other alliance partners are obligated to support their ally. The involvement of multiple countries with diverse interests and objectives can complicate conflicts and make de-escalation more challenging. For example, the complex system of interlocking alliances of great powers before World War I led to a series of interconnected commitments. When Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the alliance obligations of various countries, such as Germany and Russia, triggered a chain reaction that escalated into World War I.

Risk of Great Power War in Europe

As argued above, the realignment of existing alliances can trigger war. The declaration of the NATO summit in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia would join the alliance without providing more details on timelines (against the wishes of Germany and France) (Erlanger and Lee Myers, 2008) and requirements provoked strong reactions in Moscow and contributed to the war in Georgia the same year (Karagiannis, 2013, p.89) and later to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the establishment of the Russia supported separatist republics in Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbass region (Mearsheimer, 2014) Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, both Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership which was granted to the former while the latter is still awaiting a decision. While the expansion has created opposition from Turkey and Hungary, Moscow the Kremlin categorized the move as a "violation of our security and our national interests" as NATO member states border with Russia doubled with a signature (Kirby and Beale, 2023). The tensions have continued to increase since then when three gas and communication cables were severed between Finland and Estonia, accordingly by a China registered tanker (Syta and Kaurannen, 2023) and Kremlin sending hundreds of immigrants across the border triggering border-closing and consequent tensions among the Russian ethnic minority living in Finland (Braw, 2024).

Even the secretary general of NATO Jens Stoltenberg recognized that NATO expansion caused the 2022 Russia Ukraine war after NATO refused “to sign a promise never to enlarge NATO” as well as remove NATO infrastructure in all allies that have joined NATO since 1997” (NATO). This would have included Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Balkan countries. Stoltenberg referred to a list of demands presented by Russia to NATO in December 2021, two months before the invasion. The list has been used by academics such as John J. Mearsheimer and Jeffrey D. Sachs (Sachs, 2023) to demonstrate that Russia’s actions were defensive, intended to stop NATO’s eastward expansion and that the war could have been prevented if only the west would have made a promise not to incorporate Ukraine in the alliance. However, they seem to overlook the other demands, particularly the scaling back of NATO infrastructure from post 1997 NATO members, that was clearly a non-starter and could have preceded the reestablishment of a Russian cold war sphere of influence. Furthermore, Dmitri Trenin, the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center suggested that the fact that Russia made the proposed agreements public could indicate that Moscow never believed the US and allies would accept the terms and hence that they had decided to go ahead with unilateral military action (Roth, 2021). Finally, the father of offensive realism, John J Mearsheimer, whose theory claim that states strive for maximizing power – as opposed to maximizing security – to ensure their own survival appears to contradict his position on Russia’s intentions. From the perspective of offensive realism, maximizing power and becoming the dominant regional power is a rational and predictable strategy. As Mearsheimer bluntly put it “in the anarchic world of international politics, it’s better to be Godzilla than Bambi (2001 p.296).” In his analysis of Russian actions towards Ukraine from 2014 onwards, however, Mearsheimer adopts a defensive realist framework, while viewing NATO expansion through the lens of offensive realism.

The eastwards expansion of NATO and the incorporation of Finland and possibly Sweden after 2022 on the one side and the strengthening of the de facto alliance between Russia and China on the other reflects a changing alliance landscape in Europe that reflects a changing balance of power in Europe and a sharp increase in the risks for a great power war.

While changes in great power alliances can indicate a heightened risk of the outbreak of war so does an increase in military expenditure among the great powers.

GPW Indicators 4	Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe
% increase in military spending, arms buildup, and military modernization by major powers	High Risk

Hypothesis: A significant percentage increase in military spending, arms buildup, and military modernization by major powers is likely to correlate with an elevated risk of great power conflict. In structural realism, states exist in an anarchic international system where there is no overarching authority to guarantee state security or enforce agreements or treaties. As a result, states prioritize their own security and survival, leading to a competitive pursuit of power. This pursuit can involve increasing military capabilities, forming alliances, or adopting defensive postures. However, these actions taken by one state to enhance its security can be interpreted as aggressive or threatening by other states, creating a security dilemma.

According to structural realists, the security dilemma arises from the fear, lack of trust and uncertainty in the intentions of other states. Each state must consider the potential actions and capabilities of others and make decisions based on the assumption that other states may act in their own self-interest, potentially at the expense of others. As a result, even defensive measures taken by one state can be misperceived as offensive preparations by others, leading to a spiral of distrust, arms races, and potential conflict.

The security dilemma highlights the inherent tensions and challenges faced by states in the international system. It suggests that even well-intentioned states may find themselves caught in a cycle of insecurity and mistrust due to the structural dynamics of the system. Structural realists argue that the security dilemma makes conflict and war more likely, as states seek to secure their own interests and protect against perceived threats.

Understanding the security dilemma is crucial within the framework of structural realism because it underscores the systemic pressures and constraints that influence state behavior. It highlights the difficulties of achieving trust and cooperation among states in an anarchic international system, and it emphasizes the role of power dynamics and the competitive pursuit of security in shaping the potential for conflict. The Anglo-German arms race prior to WWI have been highlighted by historians as one of the main causes of the Great War not the least because it fueled mutual suspicions and threat perceptions between Great Britain and Germany.

The Anglo-German naval arms race that took place in the decades leading up to World War I had a significant impact on the relationship between Britain and Germany. Britain, as a naval superpower, aimed to maintain its naval supremacy, while Germany sought to challenge British naval dominance. The race became particularly tense with the introduction of the groundbreaking dreadnought battleships that made the older vessels largely obsolete.

The Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, Secretary of State of the German Imperial Naval Office aimed to develop a navy strong enough to engage in offensive actions against the Royal Navy would lead to an accommodation with Germany and thus strengthen the latter's position on the continent. The German vision was based on Admiral Tirpitz risk theory that postulated that when the German navy reached a strength equivalent to the British royal navy, the British would seek to avoid confrontation and seek accommodation with Germany and perhaps even join the Triple Alliance (Bird, 2005, p.822). Independent of the German intentions this was perhaps one of the "greatest failures of modern strategy"(Rock, 1988, pp.350-56) since Britain considered the expansion of the German navy as an existential threat to its survival as a great power. The naval superiority of the Royal navy was critical for safeguarding its global interests and ensuring the security of its Empire. The German naval build up was viewed as a direct threat to this cornerstone of British security (Crowe, 1907)⁴.

Another unanticipated and very negative effect for Germany was that the arms race drove Britain closer to Russia and France, through the Triple Entente, that aimed at balancing against the growing threat of Germany and isolate the country diplomatically (Clark, 2012 pp. 124-135). Additionally, Great Britain signed a naval agreement with Japan in 1902, thus securing the Royal Navy's flanks in the Western Pacific (Echevarria, 2015, p.22).

Finally, the race exacerbated existing geopolitical tensions and rivalries between the two countries, particularly in areas such as Africa and the Middle East. The declining Ottoman Empire presented opportunities for both Britain and Germany to increase their influence in the Middle East. Both powers sought to protect their strategic interests, including access to oil reserves, trade routes, and control over key ports in the region (Haythornthwaite, 2004, p.6.)

Critics argue that other factors were more significant in causing the war, such as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, militarism, the complex alliance systems, and the diplomatic failures leading up to the conflict. However, the arms race, combined with other geopolitical factors, created a sense of inevitability of conflict between Britain and Germany. The growing military capabilities and the intensifying geopolitical rivalries contributed to an overall deterioration in the relationship, heightening the risk of war.

⁴ Sir Eyre Crow a British diplomat and leading Germany expert in the Foreign and Commonwealth office stated in his famous 1907 memo: "Germany was aiming at a general political hegemony and maritime ascendancy, threatening the independence of her neighbors and incompatible with the survival of the British Empire." More in Crowe (1907)

Other critics maintain that German political and military leaders, far from being trapped in a security dilemma, considered the naval arms race as opportunities to promote their respective policies and agendas. Historians tend to agree that admiral Tirpitz and the rest of the German political and military leadership upgraded and expanded the Germany navy for both deterrence or coercive purposes: to ensure British abstention from a future continental war and to establish bases and access markets overseas. In London the measures raised fears that Germany's naval expansion was part of a broader strategy to challenge Britain's maritime hegemony and potentially encircle the British Isles (Kennedy, 1970, p.38)⁵. This “misunderstanding” clearly underscores the basic assumption of the security dilemma, namely that one can never be entirely certain about the intentions of the other side and even if its true today that the intentions are benign – frequently referred to by NATO leaders explaining the alliance expansion into Eastern Europe – potential adversaries also must be prepared for a change of heart tomorrow.

Risk of Great Power War in Europe

In recent years there has been a significant increase in military spending, arms buildup, and military modernization among the great powers and their allies. Russia's military buildup, particularly in the aftermath of the conflict with Georgia in 2008, has drawn attention and raised concerns among neighboring countries and NATO. Russia's efforts to modernize its armed forces, invest in advanced weaponry, and conduct large-scale military exercises have increased tensions and the risk of regional conflicts (Hackett, Childs and Barrie, 2023). According to SIPRI military spending in Europe in 2022 was 13 per cent the largest recorded by the institutions in this region since the end of the Cold War, a change largely attributed to the war between Russia and Ukraine. In comparison the same year the Russian military spending grew by an estimated 9.2 per cent in 2022 “The continuous rise in global military expenditure in recent years is a sign that we are living in an increasingly insecure world,” said Dr Nan Tian, Senior Researcher with SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme. ‘States are bolstering military strength in response to a deteriorating security environment, which they do not foresee improving in the near future (SIPRI, 2023)⁶.’

The changes in the military capabilities among the great powers and their allies threaten the regional balance of power in Europe and we are currently witnessing strategic competition and an increased risk of war as the actors seek to maintain or regain a strategic advantage through preemptive strikes.

The final indicator relates to the level of competition over strategic regions and resources between great powers.

GPW Indicators 5	Risk Assessment of Great Power War in Europe
The intensity of great power competition over key strategic resources and regions	Medium risk

Hypothesis: An escalation in the intensity of great power competition over key strategic resources and regions is likely to heighten the risk of conflict among major powers. The degree of competition is expected to be influenced by factors such as increasing global demand for critical resources, geopolitical importance of strategic regions, and the economic and military capabilities of the competing powers. A more intense competition, marked by disputes over resource-rich territories or vital sea lanes, could lead to heightened geopolitical tensions and an increased likelihood of military confrontations as great powers vie for control and access to these critical resources and regions.

⁵ In his book "The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery," Paul M. Kennedy discusses how the British perceived potential threats to their maritime dominance and security, particularly in the context of naval competition with Germany.

⁶ According to SIPRI (2023) the sharpest increases were recorded in countries bordering Russia: Finland (+36 per cent), Lithuania (+27 per cent), Sweden (+12 per cent) and Poland (+11 per cent).

Structural realists have criticized the US for dedicating the three decades following the end of the Cold War to the pursuit of liberal hegemony promoting human rights, rule of law and market economies across the entire world and where priorities were removed from the notion of vital self-interest. In the perspective of some structural realists, the only regions of vital strategic interest for great powers are their own region, where other great powers are located and critical resources for the world economy (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.210).

According to Mearsheimer competition for strategic resources often arises from the imperative of securing essential materials and commodities for economic and military purposes.

Since the distribution of power among states is a central driver of international politics in structural realism access to and control of strategic resources, states understand that control over these resources enhances their overall power and influence on the world stage. Situations where states in order to improve their own security acquiring – or denying other states access strategic resources, can inadvertently be perceived as threatening by other states and thus trigger the security dilemma.

Finally, the scarcity of strategic resources can exacerbate competition and rivalry among states as they contend for access to limited resources that are crucial for their economic development and national security. The Russo Japanese war demonstrates how the competition over the strategic resource rich region of Manchuria and Korea led to war between these two great powers.

Case study: Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905)

The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) was sparked by strategic competition between the Russia and Japan over control of Northeast Asia and access to strategic resources of this region. While Russia sought to establish control over Manchuria to secure its Trans-Siberian Railway and expand its influence in the region, Japan saw Manchuria as a potential sphere of influence and a gateway to further expansion in East Asia (Morris and Murphy, 2006, pp.131-2).

Moreover, the two powers also had conflicting interests in Korea, which was seen as strategically important for both trade and military purposes. Russia sought to maintain its influence over Korea, while Japan aimed to assert its dominance and challenge Russian presence in the region.

The Russian lease of Port Arthur and Dalian (both located in the Liaodong Peninsula) from China, as part of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, was a source of tension⁷. Japan saw these territories as falling within its sphere of influence and sought their return, while Russia aimed to consolidate its presence and control over the region (Hwang, 2010, pp.132-3).

The Russo-Japanese War was also fueled by broader geopolitical rivalries and aspirations. Japan, having undergone significant modernization and seeking to become a major world power, viewed Russia as an obstacle to its regional ambitions. Meanwhile, Russia – the preeminent Eurasian power sought to expand its influence in Europe while maintaining its influence in the Far East. Thus, Russia represented a direct and immediate challenge to Japan's ambitions and rise as a regional power.

Both Russia and Japan engaged in significant naval and military buildups, which added to the escalating tensions. Both powers were expanding their fleets and military capabilities, particularly in the maritime domain, with a focus on naval supremacy.

⁷ The Triple intervention of Russia, Germany and France effectively blocked Japan from acquiring the Liaodong peninsula as stipulated in the Treaty of Shimonoseki after the first Sino-Japanese war and therefore the fact that Russia two years later occupied the peninsula caused significant consternation and resentment in Tokyo . For more read Boyle 1993.

Japan sought to challenge Russian influence in the region, leading to a conflict that resulted in a major military defeat for Russia and a significant shift in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region (Morris and Murphy, 2006). The Japanese victory was an important steppingstone on the road to hegemony in East Asia.

Case study: World War II in Europe

Resource competition also played a significant role in contributing to the outbreak of World War II in Europe. Nazi-Germany, under Adolf Hitler, sought to expand its territories to gain access to oil fields and other strategic resources, such as iron ore in Sweden and Ukraine's agricultural lands. One of the lessons from WWI was the devastating impact of the blockade of Germany and Furthermore, during the Great Depression, ensuring food security became a pressing concern for many countries. Access to fertile agricultural land and food supplies became an even more important factor in national security calculations. The competition for food resources, particularly in resource-scarce regions, contributed to tensions and conflicts. (Craig, 1981, p. 676). Hitler therefore restructured the war plans around autarky and conquest and occupation of areas holding vital resources such as, agricultural products, oil and iron (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.91). In August 1939 Hitler stated that Germany needed "the Ukraine, in order that no one is able to starve us again as in the last war (Gerhard, 2009, p.46).

The German drive for autarky was thus rooted in desire to reduce the vulnerabilities of the German economy that surfaced during the WWI blockade, strengthen the German economy, and enhance its military capabilities (History Learning Site, 2023). Hence the need for oil and other vital resources informed and influenced Germany's military objectives and strategies prior to the war and with the German military successes at the onset of the war the expansionist ambitions grew, it sought to acquire territories with oil reserves to achieve greater economic independence and decrease its reliance on external suppliers. At the same time control over oil resources would contribute to weaken the economic and military capabilities of Germany's adversaries by denying the latter access to these resources. Within six months of invading the Soviet Union Germany had secured 71% of iron ore, 63% of its coal and after one year the German troops had accessed the oil rich Caucasus region (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.79).

The infamous Hunger Plan developed prior to operation Barbarossa in July 1941 aimed to divert food from Ukraine and Central and Eastern Russia to Germany and although the plan that included starving to death 30-40 million Slavs and convert the region into a large farming colony for the Germanic people never fully materialized it caused the deaths of 4,2 million Soviet citizens (largely Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians) in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union in the period 1941-44 (Gerhard, 2009, p.46).

The examples above underscore how strategic competition among great power wars of the 20th century (and before) over key regions and vital resources increases the likelihood of armed conflict.

Risk of Great Power War in Europe

As the polar ice caps melt, the Arctic - believed to hold significant untapped natural resources, including oil, natural gas, minerals, and fisheries - has become an arena for strategic competition due to its increasing geopolitical and economic significance. Several major powers, including the United States, Russia, China, and some NATO member states, are actively involved in shaping their interests in the region.

For Russia this development represents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the prospect of opening new trade routes between Asia and Europe could potentially shorten the travel time and costs between the two regions. Furthermore, the access to rare minerals, gas and oil could strengthen the Russian economic position and influence over the global oil and gas market. On the other hand, the ice melting reduces the natural defense surrounding Russia's second-strike nuclear facilities in and around the Kola Peninsula and would therefore induce Russia to strengthen the Bastion defense. Bastion defense

refers to a defensive strategy designed to protect strategic assets, such as ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) carrying nuclear weapons, covering the Barents and Norwegian sea, the GIUK gap (the sea between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom) consisting of “multi-layered, sea denial and interdiction capabilities” (Boulegue, 2019). The strengthening of the Bastion strategy “would put more pressure on North Atlantic Sea lines of communication (SLOC)” and would likely require more direct control over Northern Norway, including Svalbard to be effective (Kvernmo, 2019).

NATO countries have also increased their naval drills and exercises in the Arctic and have updated their plans and scaled up their permanent presence in the region. For example, US, UK and Dutch rotational forces have increased their presence in Norway over the last few years (Savitz, 2022, p.39). The recent incorporation of Finland into NATO and imminent Swedish membership in the alliance will strengthen NATO’s Arctic posture and – as a consequence – augment Russia’s concern. Still “Russia now operates a third more Arctic military bases than the U.S. and NATO combined, suggesting a strategic advantage in the region” (Williams and Novak, 2022).

Furthermore, there has been several sabotage actions against gas pipelines and communication cables in the Baltic Sea since the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 which could be the start of a new phase of hybrid warfare against vital infrastructure (Oltermann, 2022). Europe is still highly dependent on fossil fuels as a source of energy, and 40% of the oil and gas consumed in EU countries originates from Russia. In the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, EU started implementing a plan to be independent of Russian oil and gas by 2030 (McGrath, 2022). In the meantime, as EU is divesting to countries like Norway that currently provides between 20 and 25% of EU gas needs to expand their capacity. This supply would be highly vulnerable to hybrid attacks and disruption could be used as blackmail or as a prelude to a larger offensive targeting NATO Europe.

Conclusions

In conclusion, predicting the outbreak of Great Power War is a complex endeavor that requires a nuanced understanding of international relations. This article has explored the application of structural realism indicators as a framework for anticipating the likelihood of conflicts among great powers. Drawing on indicators measuring changes in the balance of power, alliance systems, military expenditure, and the intensity of the competition over strategic resources and regions structural realism offers valuable insights into the systemic forces shaping the geopolitical landscape in the world and provides critical elements for forecasting potential conflicts. Examining historical precedents and current geopolitical trends through the lens of structural realism provides a theoretical foundation for assessing the risk of war among great powers in Europe and elsewhere.

While structural realism provides a robust framework, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The theory may not capture the full spectrum of the dynamic nature of international relations and the potential for unforeseen events pose challenges to precise predictions. More elaborate, early warning tools – mentioned in the introduction to this article exist for that purpose and these could complement the GPW framework to pin down more exact timing and location of the outbreak of great power war. Finally, there’s a need to develop better tools to measure accurately the indicators, particularly those related to the balance of power between the different potential alliance constellations like SIPRI’s database on military expenditure.

The findings from this article are that there’s an overall high risk of great power war in Europe. Four out of five indicators were assessed as high and one, the indicator related to the intensity of competition over strategic resources and regions, is assessed at medium risk. Therefore, it’s imperative to prepare to mitigate the continent-wide impacts of such potentially devastating yet highly likely Great Power War.

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