




Structural Realist Analysis of NATO–Russia Geopolitical Competition in Eastern Europe and the Origins of the Ukraine War

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The sentence “this crisis is the outcome of a long-standing competition arising from a historically accumulated and structurally embedded conflict” could benefit from greater clarity. Specify which mechanisms (e.g., polarity shifts, alliance expansion) represent “structurally embedded conflict.”

The paper mentions NATO enlargement in 1999 and 2004, but omits 2009 and 2017 accessions (e.g., Croatia, Montenegro). Clarify why these are not considered structurally significant, or acknowledge them briefly for completeness.

The section draws heavily on Rumelili and Browning & Joenniemi. Consider clarifying whether “ontological insecurity” is treated here as a constructivist supplement or reinterpreted through a realist lens. This has implications for how identity is operationalized.

The claim that “NATO came to be seen...as an ontological aggressor...” is powerful but under-evidenced. Quote or reference specific language from Russian doctrines or speeches that exemplifies this perception beyond broad secondary claims.

The subsection on “Strategic Culture Mismatch” is a strength. Consider reinforcing the claim “ambiguity equals crisis escalation” with a counter-example of Western deterrence logic (e.g., NATO’s extended deterrence ambiguity toward Baltic states).

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The paragraph beginning “The structural realist approach adopted in this study...” integrates ontological insecurity and civilizational realism but lacks clarification on whether these are sub-types of realism or external theoretical supplements. Clarify the epistemological consistency of combining Waltzian realism with constructivist notions like “civilizational imaginaries.”

In the sentence “The ultimate objective of this framework is to reveal how long-term systemic configurations...” consider unpacking “strategic imaginaries” for clarity. Are these elite narratives, institutional path dependencies, or ideological visions?

The sentence “symbolic gestures such as the NATO–Russia Founding Act...” risks being dismissive. Consider elaborating on how the Founding Act failed structurally or institutionally (e.g., absence of enforcement mechanisms, lack of shared threat assessments).

The term “conditionality without inclusion” is compelling. Consider briefly defining it in the text: does it refer to EU pressure without membership prospects, or NATO security alignment without protection?

The sentence “the failure of strategic dialogue mechanisms...” would benefit from specific examples of when/why OSCE or NATO–Russia Council talks failed. For instance, cite the year or nature of a diplomatic breakdown (e.g., after Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014).

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.