

The Power of Perception: a Neoclassical Realist analysis of US-Russia relations

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Introduction

The question of whether we are currently in a ‘New Cold War’ or not has been widely debated by the media, politicians, and within the academic field, and as such remains a pertinent issue worthy of exploration. Interactions between the US and Russia over recent years have highlighted some clear tensions within the strained relationship, and the Ukrainian crisis has certainly not helped in dispelling the cold war narrative propagated by a new brigade of cold warriors. This perspective, held by authors such as Edward Lucas (2014), views the Russian state as embarking on a quest to regain the power and prestige that the Soviet Union formally held, and perceives Moscow’s foreign policy to be inherently aggressive and an explicit challenge to the current world order. This research however seeks to counter the dominant viewpoint which places the two states within yet another conflictual framework, further perpetuating the destabilisation of their current relations. Instead a more nuanced analysis is presented which attempts to give credence to the ‘Cold Peace’ thesis outlined by Richard Sakwa (2013), whereby Putin does not seek to recreate an empire but merely alleviate its disenfranchised position in the contemporary state of affairs.

Methodology

The ‘Cold Peace’ argument is put forth utilizing the progressive insights of realism’s newest branch - neoclassical realism - which draws upon Kenneth Waltz’s ‘levels of analysis’ approach, shown below.

Third Image: System
Polarity, Distribution of power/capabilities, Anarchy, Alliances
Second Image: State/Society
Economic system, Political culture, Regime type, Public opinion
First Image: Individual
Perception, Idiosyncrasy, Personality, Beliefs, Psychology

The field of political psychology is also innovatively incorporated in the form of operational code analysis. Interpretations can be made about statesmen's philosophical and instrumental beliefs through close scrutiny of public speeches and interviews, as verbs are ‘considered to be a speaker’s linguistic representation of perceived power relationships’ (Walker, 1990: 407). The analysis of Presidents Obama and Putin’s speeches at the UN General Assembly in September 2015 is shown below.

Barack Obama’s 2015 UNGA Operational Code

Philosophical Indices	Numerical Values
Nature of the Political Universe	+.29
	(somewhat friendly)
Realization of Political Values	+.14
	(somewhat optimistic)
Predictability of Political Future	.21
	(low)
Control over Historical Development	.26
	(low)
Role of Chance	.95
	(very high)
Instrumental Indices	
Strategic Approach to Goals	+.36
	(somewhat cooperative)
Tactical Pursuit of Goals	+.24
	(somewhat cooperative)
Risk Orientation	.21
	(low)
Timing of Action	
a. Cooperation/Conflict	.64
	(high flexibility)
b. Words/Deeds	.56
	(medium flexibility)
Utility of Means	
Reward	.19
	(low)
Promise	.15
	(low)
Appeal/Support	.34
	(low)
Oppose/Resist	.23
	(low)
Threaten	.00
	(very low)
Punish	.09
	(very low)

Conclusion

This research finds that the current circumstances do not mirror the conditions existent during the Cold War, with asymmetries prevalent across all three images and within the economic, military and political spheres. Whilst Putin’s operational code supports the perception that Moscow’s intentions and motivations are often unclear, it is dangerous to frame recent interactions within the previous confrontational framework. Nevertheless, Western triumphalism and ignorance of Russian concerns and interests have propelled us into a spiral model whereby the prevailing perception of Russian foreign policy assertiveness ignores the Kremlin’s underlying persistent feeling of fear and insecurity.

To avoid pushing Russia, and indeed other rising nations, to the brink of explicitly wanting to challenge the current world order, the US and the West more broadly must read their foreign policy actions as a desire to be respected and afforded a leading role in the global system.

Vladimir Putin’s 2015 UNGA Operational Code

Philosophical Indices	Numerical Values
Nature of the Political Universe	+.24
	(somewhat friendly)
Realization of Political Values	+.08
	(Mixed)
Predictability of Political Future	.24
	(low)
Control over Historical Development	.17
	(low)
Role of Chance	.96
	(very high)
Instrumental Indices	
Strategic Approach to Goals	+.73
	(very cooperative)
Tactical Pursuit of Goals	+.32
	(somewhat cooperative)
Risk Orientation	.62
	(medium)
Timing of Action	
a. Cooperation/Conflict	.27
	(low flexibility)
b. Words/Deeds	.37
	(low flexibility)
Utility of Means	
Reward	.14
	(low)
Promise	.05
	(very low)
Appeal/Support	.68
	(high)
Oppose/Resist	.09
	(very low)
Threaten	.00
	(very low)
Punish	.05
	(very low)