Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36176

The Evolution of Post-Cold War Russia-West Relations and Their Interaction Patterns: A Defensive Realist Perspective

Miao Huang

International Business English College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
15992457679@163.com

Abstract. Against the backdrop of the reconfiguration of the international landscape following the end of the Cold War, the relationship has shifted from early expectations of cooperation to a prolonged pattern of strategic rivalry. This paper explores why the multiple efforts by both sides to boost their relations failed to achieve substantive progress. Based on defensive realism, it focuses on strategic signaling and credibility as key mechanisms shaping mutual perceptions and the escalation of the security dilemma. Moreover, the study examines how cooperative intentions were communicated and interpreted, and why they were frequently discounted or misread. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative case-study approach based on key developments from the early post-Soviet period to the first two terms of Vladimir Putin's presidency, supported by secondary literature in international relations. The findings suggest that Russia's signals of cooperation, such as economic reform, military retrenchment, and institutional engagement, were often deemed non-credible in the West due to perceived inconsistencies between external behavior and domestic political trajectories. Conversely, Western policies, particularly NATO enlargement and engagement in the post-Soviet space, were viewed by Russia as signals of strategic exclusion. And these divergent interpretations created a persistent credibility gap, deepening mutual distrust and the security dilemma, and contributing to the long-term deterioration of bilateral relations.

Keywords: Defensive Realism, Signal Breach, Security Dilemma, Russia-West Relations, NATO Eastward Expansion

1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War is widely interpreted as "the end of history," reflecting expectations of a consolidated Western-led liberal order. However, more than three decades later, Russia-West relations have evolved into a sustained strategic confrontation. This paper examines why repeated efforts to improve Russia-West relations have failed to produce lasting results. Based on defensive realism, it focuses on how strategic signals are produced, interpreted, and assessed in terms of credibility under conditions of anarchy, and how these processes shape mutual perceptions and interaction outcomes. In particular, it covers key developments in Russia-West relations from the early post-Soviet period through the first two terms of Vladimir Putin's presidency (1991-2008), using a literature review and case-study approach to analyze both Russia's cooperative initiatives,

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36176

including economic reforms, military retrenchment, and engagement in institutional cooperation, and Western policies, particularly NATO enlargement and engagement in the post-Soviet space, as interpreted by Russia. The paper further investigates how conflicting expectations generate gaps between intended cooperation and perceived intentions, and how such dynamics may contribute to mutual distrust and the deepening of the security dilemma. It proceeds through historical case analysis to demonstrate these signaling dynamics, and aims to explain Russia-West relations as a problem of strategic communication under structural uncertainty.

2. Theoretical foundations of defensive realism and the security dilemma

Framed around the theoretical explanation of the "security dilemma," defensive realism emphasizes that in an anarchic system, security measures taken by a state for self-defense are often unintentionally interpreted by other states as threatening, thereby triggering mutually reinforcing security competition [1]. Even in the absence of explicit hostility, fear of other states' intentions and misperception may drive conflicts into a vicious cycle [2]. Building on this, subsequent studies suggest that the relative balance between offense and defense helps explain variations in the severity of the security dilemma and the scope for cooperation, and argue that structural constraints often push states toward balancing behavior as a response to uncertainty [3, 4].

However, the security dilemma is not an unchangeable structural fate. The development of relevant theories indicates that countries can reduce misjudgment by sending clear and credible signals of goodwill, alleviating mutual suspicion and promoting the formation of cooperative space. During the theoretical evolution process, some scholars further proposed a systematic analytical framework to define and operationalize the core logic of defensive realism [5]. In the adaptive path, classic research emphasized reducing uncertainty through cost signals, material and technical condition constraints, and institutional transparency [3]. And subsequent research shifted to trust-building mechanisms, emphasizing the use of gradually accumulating verifiable cooperative behaviors in a "mutual strategic guarantee" manner to replace continuous suspicion [5, 6]. Besides, sending high-cost signals to boost the credibility of defensive intentions, leveraging offensive-defensive balance as a technical condition, and establishing transparent communication mechanisms are all considered to help alleviate the security dilemma [7]. Recent case-based studies have further verified the feasibility of regulating the security dilemma from both psychological and material dimensions [8].

Under this theoretical framework, the cyclical reinforcement of the breakdown of trust between Russia and the West can be understood as a "two-way credibility dilemma," in which de-escalatory signals sent by one side are interpreted as unreliable or ineffective due to information asymmetry and pre-existing expectation structures, while the defensive or balancing actions taken by the other side based on such interpretations further reinforce the initial mistrust, generating a sustained interactive mechanism of trust erosion. Across three dimensions, strategic signal credibility is assessed: cost-benefit consistency, domestic-international coherence, and temporal verifiability.

3. Russia's strategic engagement with the west and signal credibility tensions

3.1. Early post-soviet alignment attempts under Yeltsin

During the Yeltsin period, strategic engagement was characterized by three types of signals: economic integration, security concessions, and political identity. However, these signals were disconnected in practice, exacerbating the security dilemma and trust deficit [9].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36176

On economic integration, Yeltsin implemented "shock therapy," sought G7 aid, and pursued WTO accession. Yet Western aid was used as a tool to force market opening rather than build strategic partnership, focusing on Russia's resource sector rather than overall capacity building. Yeltsin's concessions reinforced Western structural advantages rather than reciprocal partnership. In terms of domestic-international coherence, shock therapy lacked broad social support, rendering its domestic base fragile.

On security concessions, Russia withdrew troops from Eastern Europe and cooperated on nuclear disarmament, signing the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. However, NATO's 1994 decision to enlarge eastward was perceived by Russia as a threat. Yeltsin's concessions were viewed by the West as reluctant gestures under duress. From the cost-benefit perspective, although the cost was high, simultaneous NATO enlargement undermined the verifiability of Russia's signal.

On political identity, Russia sought to emulate Western democratic institutions. However, reforms were seen by the West as "similar in form" rather than "in spirit," and were undermined by oligarchy and weak rule of law. The pro-Western policy triggered nationalist backlash, and Russia's identity remained ambiguous between "great power" and "aid-seeker." In terms of coherence, political identity signals faced nationalist resistance and international skepticism, a double fracture that damaged credibility.

3.2. Early post-soviet cooperation strategies under early Putin

Under Putin, cooperation strategies across security, institutional, and economic domains persisted but increasingly generated structural contradictions, where the expansion of cooperation signals was accompanied by a declining credibility of commitment.

On economic integration, Putin leveraged energy exports to deepen interdependence with Europe. However, this strategy produced a dual paradox. First, selective supply interruptions during the 2006 and 2009 Russia-Ukraine gas disputes reinforced Western perceptions of energy weaponization, transforming interdependence into asymmetric vulnerability. Second, economic engagement became increasingly decoupled from security and identity concerns, as Western perceptions were shaped less by trade logic than by Russia's perceived strategic orientation [10]. This decoupling weakened the internal coherence of economic signaling in terms of cost-benefit consistency.

On security concessions, following 9/11 Putin supported the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council and enabled logistical transit across the Central Asian corridor [11, 12]. However, subsequent NATO enlargement at the 2002 Prague summit undermined expectations of reciprocal restraint. Moreover, counterterrorism cooperation remained episodic and contingent, limiting its conversion into stable strategic commitment [13]. From a verifiability perspective, the absence of repeated, institutionalized interaction weakened the durability of these signals.

On political identity, Putin's consolidation of authority and articulation of "sovereign democracy" were increasingly read in Western discourse as democratic backsliding [14, 15]. This produced a persistent cognitive gap between domestic legitimacy and international assessment, with Russia's identity oscillating between a "European civilization" and an "independent Eurasian center," thereby generating a structural disjunction that undermined external credibility. Although cooperation signals expanded across all three domains, their credibility systematically declined, thus reflecting a growing mismatch between intensified engagement and deteriorating trust.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36176

4. Western strategic responses and signal credibility erosion in Russia-West relations

While Russia sent cooperative signals, Western strategic responses were concentrated in two dimensions: NATO enlargement and political involvement in Kosovo and the color revolutions.

4.1. NATO enlargement: the signal interpretation divide

From a cognitive perspective, NATO enlargement unfolded in two waves: Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined in 1999, followed by seven states, including the Baltic countries, in 2004. While the West treated enlargement as an institutional process consistent with a "political, not legally binding" framework, Russia interpreted it as a progressive shift of the strategic environment toward its borders.

This divergence reflects a split between observable actions and their interpretive framing. From Russia's perspective, enlargement was associated with the erosion of strategic buffer space, exclusion from the European security order, and the consolidation of Western dominance during a period of relative Russian weakness. By contrast, NATO's position emphasized the absence of formal legal constraints on enlargement and its compatibility with sovereign choice [16, 17].

Cognitively, Russian elites increasingly interpreted NATO expansion as a security-relevant signal under conditions of uncertainty, where ambiguous defensive actions were more likely to be read as latent hostility. This interpretive mechanism contributed to a self-reinforcing perception cycle, in which defensive uncertainty generated anticipatory threat assessments [18].

From a signaling perspective, military alliance expansion is structurally prone to misinterpretation because it alters relative power distributions rather than producing direct reciprocal gains. NATO's assurances were therefore perceived by Russia as low-verifiability commitments. After the 2008 Bucharest Summit declared that Georgia and Ukraine "will become members," Russian expectations shifted toward confirmation of prior suspicions, reinforcing the belief that Partnership for Peace mechanisms functioned as instruments of strategic containment [3]. As a result, successive rounds of enlargement generated cumulative negative expectations, in which each accession was interpreted as validation of prior threat perceptions [6, 19].

4.2. Kosovo and color revolutions: the dual mechanism of political intervention

From a Russian perceptual standpoint, the 1999 Kosovo intervention generated three interrelated signals: institutional marginalization via bypassing the UN Security Council, selective application of international rules, and the consolidation of hierarchical order in which Russia occupied a subordinate position as a "rule-taker" [16]. This pattern indicated a willingness to incur legitimacy costs in pursuit of geopolitical objectives. It also established a recurring logic in which multilateral deadlock preceded unilateral intervention and subsequent faits accomplis, later echoed in Iraq and Libya. Repetition of this sequence reinforced expectations of low institutional constraint, strengthening Russia's negative assessment of Western signaling consistency [16].

By contrast, the color revolutions of 2003–2005 constituted a distinct form of political intervention aimed at domestic regime stability, involving NGOs, external funding, and political technologies. With over $65 million in US support directed to relevant political organizations, these activities were interpreted in Russia not as external security pressure but as internal regime subversion [20]. Unlike military intervention, which primarily affects external boundaries, this mode of influence directly challenged internal controllability and regime survival capacity [21]. As a result, it triggered domestic defensive mobilization rather than external balancing responses. Under

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36176

conditions of uncertainty, such ambiguous political actions were more likely to be interpreted as intentional regime change strategies, amplifying perceived threat levels [18].

Despite their operational differences, both forms of intervention converged in their perceptual consequence: they reinforced a stable Russian cognitive schema that Western policy prioritized hegemonic objectives over respect for sovereignty. Once established, this schema became a filtering structure through which subsequent signals were consistently interpreted, reducing the credibility of alternative Western intentions.

5. The structural failure of mutual trust mechanisms and the entrenchment of the Russia-West security dilemma

The erosion of mutual trust followed a cumulative security spiral. NATO enlargement reshaped the European security environment but was interpreted by Russia as offensive expansion, prompting military adjustments on both sides and, in turn, strengthening NATO's eastern posture and deepening Russian threat perceptions [3]. Instead of stabilizing expectations, this interaction produced a self-reinforcing cycle of mutual suspicion.

From a signaling perspective, the lack of verifiable commitments prevented cooperative signals from being converted into credible assurances. Institutions like the NATO-Russia Council provided limited substantive guarantees and were increasingly interpreted by Russia as instruments of tactical de-escalation rather than strategic integration [22]. Similarly, Western engagement was filtered via a framework of opportunistic interpretation, which weakened assumptions of reciprocal trust [23]. The 2008 Bucharest Summit declaration further intensified these expectations by reinforcing Russia's perception of unresolved strategic uncertainty.

As a result, trust erosion accumulated over time. Besides, structural uncertainty about intentions reduced the scope for benign interpretation, as new information was increasingly processed through preexisting threat expectations [24]. At the same time, shifts in the regional balance of power became self-reinforcing: NATO expanded its forward deployment capabilities while Russia strengthened its western military posture, increasing the relative cost of restoring cooperative expectations [25]. Under these conditions, signaling interactions lost credibility, as repeated low-cost signals failed to generate durable expectations without sustained, high-density interaction, and relations instead increasingly exhibited a pattern of reciprocal suspicion and breakdown in expectations [26]. These dynamics did not directly "cause collapse," but contributed to a long-term deterioration in signaling credibility. This cumulative erosion reinforced a persistent security dilemma in which neither side could reliably interpret the other's intentions in cooperative terms [27].

6. Conclusion

Based on defensive realism and a "signal credibility" framework, this paper analyzes why Russia-West relations failed to improve sustainably from the late 20th to early 21st centuries. The findings show that Russia's economic, security, and political identity signals were not perceived as credible by the West due to cost-benefit inconsistencies, domestic-international incoherence, and limited verifiability, while Western actions including NATO enlargement, the Kosovo intervention, and the color revolutions were interpreted by Russia as strategic compression and regime subversion. This systematic mutual misreading accumulated over time, leading to trust mechanism failure and the consolidation of the security dilemma. Specifically, Russia's strategic signals exhibit a pronounced domestic-international disconnect, which undermines their overall coherence; moreover, isolated

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36176

concessions lack mechanisms for sustained verification. In contrast, Western eastward expansion and interventionist actions, which repeatedly violated prior commitments, have generated, from Russia's perspective, a highly consistent "threat verification chain." The systemic failure of strategic signals across all three credibility dimensions ultimately precipitated the structural collapse of the bilateral trust mechanism. The study is limited by its primary focus on state-level interaction, with relatively limited attention to domestic political factors. Future research could extend the analytical scope by using cross-case comparison and quantitative methods to test the generalizability of the signal credibility trap.

References

[1] Radchenko, S. (2020). Nothing but humiliation for Russia: Moscow and NATO's eastern enlargement, 1993-1995. *J. Strateg. Stud., 43*, 769–815.

[2] Wu, W. C. (2022). From Kosovo War to Ukraine crisis: NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's "strategic awakening". *Russ. East Eur. Cent. Asian Stud., 3*, 1–26.

[3] Yang, L., & Zhang, L. X. (2023). Formation and escalation of the security dilemma between Russia and NATO after the Cold War. *Russ. East Eur. Cent. Asian Stud., 2*, 5–20.

[4] Rodovich, Y. V. (2022). 1990 and 1994 as the most important milestones on the way to NATO's expansion to the East. *Via in tempore. Hist. Polit. Sci., 49*, 595–604.

[5] Wang, W. (2025). Systemic roots of regional conflicts: Long-term competition between the United States and Russia and peace in Eurasia. *Russ. East Eur. Cent. Asian Stud., 3*.

[6] Marolov, D., & Galeva, J. (2026). Explaining escalation: The security dilemma in three contemporary international conflicts. *J. Lib. Int. Affairs, 12*, 16–38.

[7] Shtavica, M. (2024). Evaluation of the Kosovo crisis and NATO intervention using the basic principles of realism (neo-classical realism). *J. Dipl. Strategy, 5*, 329–377.

[8] Wang, J. T. (2016). *National security dilemma of Russia from the perspective of security complex: A case study on Eastern Europe.* Master's Thesis, Shandong University.

[9] Cao, D. J. (2022). Cheap signaling in summit diplomacy and its credibility identification. *China Social Science Net*. http://www.cssn.cn

[10] Togberg, V., & Heino, M. (2020). Vladimir Putin, twenty years on: Russia's foreign policy. *Russian Journal of International Affairs*.

[11] Šleivytė, J. (2009). Russia's European agenda and the Baltic States. *Cranfield University Defence College of Management and Technology*.

[12] Gray, J. (2002). Russian relationships with the West: The implications for military reform. *Naval Postgraduate School*.

[13] Medvedev, S. (2008). *Rethinking the national interest: Putin's turn in Russian foreign policy.* George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

[14] Liu, Y. W., & Cui, Q. M. (2008). *Russia's international cooperation in counter-terrorism.* Institute of Latin American Studies, CASS. Available at: http://ilas.cssn.cn.

[15] Zhang, S. H. (2012). *Putin's path and the future of Russian politics.* Center for Russian Studies, East China Normal University. Available at: http://www.ecnu.edu.cn.

[16] Taylor, S. C. (2009). *The NATO special operations forces transformation initiative.* Naval Postgraduate School.

[17] Tsereteli, S. (2018). *NATO enlargement: Georgia's prospects of membership.* Charles University Master's Thesis.

[18] Tang, S. P. (2014). A new attribution theory of international relations: Dimensions of uncertainty and their cognitive challenges. *International Political Studies, 1,* 23-39.

[19] Carr, F., et al. (2018). *NATO and the East European security dilemma.* Palgrave Macmillan.

[20] Pan, R. L., & Dai, Z. Q. (2005). "Color Revolution" and international NGOs. *Journal of University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (Social Sciences Edition), 7*, 1-6.

[21] Li, Y. (2018). Contemporary Russian youth policy and measures to prevent "Color Revolution". *Russian Studies, 2*, 45-56.

[22] Kydd, A. (2001). Trust building, trust breaking: The dilemma of NATO enlargement. *International Security, 26*(2), 85-121. https://doi.org/10.1162/002081801317193600.

[23] George, D. C., & Alverdian, I. (2025). Repositioning North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): The new security dilemma on trans-Atlantic relations amid shifting global geopolitics. *Journal of Southeast Asian and*

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36176

Global Studies, 8(1), 45-60. https://doi.org/10.7454/jsgs.v8i1.1164.
[24] Thomasen, G. (2022). Bridging perspectives on security in Europe. BASIC.
[25] Wilhelmsen, J., & Hjermann, A. R. (2022). Russian certainty of NATO hostility: Repercussions in the Arctic. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics, 13*, 89–105. https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v13.3378.
[26] Frix, N. (2016). *NATO, Russia and the Ukraine crisis.* Indiana University Master's Thesis. https://doi.org/10.7912/C22M1N.
[27] Bezerra, V. D. S. (2022). NATO-Russia's "conflictual relationship": "Instability" as a defining factor in the political interaction between Moscow and the Atlantic Alliance. *Journal of Global Security Issues, 3*(3), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2022.3-01.