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UKRAINE AND A NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: A REVISIT OF THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY

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This article applies Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex (RSC) Theory to the post-2022 transformation of European security. It argues that Russia's aggression and full-scale invasion sought to eliminate Ukraine's role as an "insulator state", fusing the formerly distinct EU-centred and post-Soviet RSCs into a single interdependent super-complex. Its future remains an open securitisation contest: so that averting Russian hegemony depends on sustained Ukraine-EU balancing, expedited Ukrainian EU integration and active transatlantic engagement.

Introduction

The post-Cold War European security architecture, once predicated on the assumption of normative institutionalism and cautious economic interdependence with Moscow, was shattered by the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moscow's revisionist grand strategy aims at the violent dismantling of the Euro-Atlantic security order, so as to establish a sphere of unquestioned hegemonic dominance in Europe.

However, rather than fracturing the continent, Russian aggression has in fact catalysed an unprecedented structural realignment. Within that shift, Ukraine has transitioned from a role of 'insulator state' into that of a systemic anchor of continental defence. Analysing this transformation

requires looking beyond traditional power-balance metrics in European security. Recent structural shifts with the active integration of Ukraine into the European defence technological and industrial base demonstrate that European and Ukrainian security are now structurally and economically interconnected to a high degree.

The scale of this military and institutional integration represents a fundamental redrawing of geopolitical boundaries, and requires a rigorous conceptual lens to understand how these distinct spheres are merging. Buzan and Wæver's regional security complex (RSC) theory¹ provides a framework that supports situational and strategic analysis, while offering the necessary theoretical depth for forecasting the future trajectory of regional developments.

1 B. Buzan, *Regional Security Complex Theory in the Post-Cold War World*, [in:] F. Söderbaum, T.M. Shaw (eds.), *Theories of New Regionalism*, Palgrave Macmillan: London 2003, p. 140.

Examining power dynamics on the wider European continent through the prism of the RSC theory reveals that the European regional security complex is currently undergoing a generational shift. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represents a catalyst that is accelerating the transformation of the European RSC. This article argues that there is an ongoing process leading to the formation of one integrated "super-complex RSC", with a strong interregional level of security dynamics. If an effective balancing act is not upheld by the EU-centred RSC, with Ukraine as an integral and indispensable part, the system will transform into a Russia-centred superpower RSC based on Moscow's military-political hegemony. This makes Ukraine's accession to the EU on an expedited timeline a matter of strategic importance to the Union's enduring agency.



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To fully grasp the magnitude of this systemic shift, one must first establish the theoretical and historical baseline of the order that is presently unravelling. Conceptualising this disruption requires understanding the foundational structures of continental interdependence. Assessing the ongoing military-political consolidation of this new

European architecture requires a clear conceptual baseline of how continental security dynamics were previously compartmentalised. According to Buzan and Weaver, regional security complexes are defined as "a set of units whose major processes of complex securitisation and desecuritisation are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another"². The rupture of historical moments or transformative periods leads to the reassembling and restructuring of regional security complexes. For the European RSC, the major moment of this sort came in 1989 with the downfall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the bipolar security structure. For the most part of the ensuing post-Cold War era in European history, the security structure of Europe has shown the continuity of a model established in 1991, with the European landmass divided into two separate centred regional security complexes: the EU-Europe RSC based around the EU and the post-Soviet RSC centred around Russia, as the key actor capable of projecting power in the immediate regional neighbourhood³.

The Pre-Invasion Architecture: Two RSCs and a Contested Middle

The next transformative moments of arguably similar political and historical magnitude came in 2014 and later in 2022, with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine⁴. Moscow set out to challenge the post-Cold War security structure, move beyond the post-Soviet RSC and penetrate the sphere of the EU-Europe RSC. Applying Buzan and Weaver's definition to this context, Russia's securitisation of a threat from

2 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p. 492.

3 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p. 343.

4 O. Ditych, M. Laryš, *What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine?*, «European Security», May 2024, p. 2.

NATO and Ukraine was so “interlinked with the European and Euro Atlantic security that concerns of both parties could no longer be analysed or resolved apart from one another”⁵. Since the attempted illegal annexation of Crimea, through armed aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and now including the full-scale invasion of February 2022, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has become a signature feature of the European security landscape. This has created an effect of security interdependence amid intractable security dynamics between the EU-centred and Russia-centred regional security complexes.

For roughly two decades, the geopolitical architecture of the continent was characterised by recurrent phases of friction and engagement between the EU-centred RSC and post-Soviet RSC. During this period, the boundary between these two distinct security environments was maintained by a contested functional buffer zone, with Ukraine serving as the critical “insulator state”. Russia’s invasion in February 2022 attempted to merge these RSC structures, by means of obliterating the insulator model.

Moscow’s maximalist attempt to forcefully absorb Ukraine into a hegemonic, Russia-centred complex triggered an unprecedented, reciprocal securitisation response from the EU-Europe RSC, amplified by active engagement from the United States. By erasing the buffer, this zero-sum contest initiated the structural fusion of the two formerly distinct RSC architectures. Hence,

the current European security environment has turned into a unified super-complex defined by Buzan and Wæver as “a set of RSCs within which the presence of one or more great powers generates relatively high and consistent levels of interregional security dynamics”⁶.



Moscow’s maximalist attempt to forcefully absorb Ukraine into a hegemonic, Russia-centred complex triggered an unprecedented, reciprocal securitisation response from the EU-Europe RSC

For three decades following 1991, Ukraine occupied a contested strategic position as a buffer zone between the EU-Europe and post-Soviet RSCs. In RSCT (RSC Theory) terms, it functioned as an “insulator state,” occupying a geopolitical fault line without formal absorption into either security architecture⁷. Yet such an insulator status is rarely permanent. As Buzan and Wæver argue, such states are “likely candidates for external transformation”⁸, particularly when the integrationist pull of one neighbouring RSC intensifies at the expense of another⁹. Hence, an insulator’s survival depends entirely on the viability of the balancing act between these competing regional forces.

In Ukraine’s case, the gradual consolidation of its political and economic orientation towards the European RSC unsettled an

5 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p. 491.

6 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.492.

7 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.484.

8 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.487.

9 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.487.

equilibrium that Moscow had come to regard as strategically indispensable. Russia interpreted this shift as an unacceptable loss to its self-declared sphere of influence, and sought to reverse it through coercion and, ultimately, military force. The 2022 invasion was, therefore, a maximalist attempt to physically absorb the insulator state into the post-Soviet RSC, before it could fully integrate into the EU RSC.

Before 2022, Ukraine was assigned a role of a buffer state “standing at the centre of a strong pattern of securitisation, and its role was to separate rival powers”¹⁰. Russia considered this to be a temporary artificial structure that was to be eliminated when the circumstances were right. The EU-centred RSC considered this model, based on an insulator state as a grey security zone delineating the two RSCs, to be stable and permanent. However, this structure was ruptured by Russia in 2014, and ultimately eliminated in 2022.

Russia's Revisionist Designs

The strategic design honed by the Russian leadership after the rupture of the post-Cold War European security architecture aims to forcefully impose the structural fusion of the post-Soviet and EU RSCs. By trying to violently eliminate the Ukrainian “insulator state”, Russia aspires to weaponise its forward military presence, in order to project unmitigated military-political influence directly into Central and Eastern Europe. In effect, Moscow is attempting a fundamental alteration of the European security

constellation, by reengineering regional power dynamics to secure a highly favourable position at the global systemic level.

To execute this geopolitical brinksmanship, Russia initially weaponised the deep desecuritisation trend that had lulled the Euro-Atlantic community into a false sense of security prior to 2022¹¹. Their objective has been to dismantle the US-centric security architecture, and to replace it with an order subordinated to Russian military-political hegemony. Decoupling the transatlantic alliance has historically served as a core element of Moscow's grand strategy. However, initiating the 2022 invasion, Russia profoundly miscalculated the US, European and Ukrainian reaction, and triggered a historic re-securitisation rather than capitulation. As evidenced by the sweeping 2025–2026 EU defence mandates, including the 150 billion euros Security Action for Europe (SAFE) framework and the broader Re-Arm Europe plan, the EU-centred RSC is rapidly consolidating its own strategic autonomy and defence-industrial base. Despite facing a newly fortified continent, Moscow's ultimate objective remains unchanged: to use Ukraine as a springboard to elevate Russian status from that of a regional great power to that of a superpower, defined as an “actor with broad-spectrum capabilities exercised across the whole of the international system”¹².

A defining feature of Russia's long-term strategic design is its simultaneous penetration of the “four levels of the EU RSC security constellation”¹³. Rather than relying

10 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.489.

11 J. Sperling, M. Webber, NATO and the Ukraine Crisis: Collective Securitisation, «*European Journal of International Security*», vol. 2, no. 1, 2017, p. 32.

12 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.34.

13 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.51.

solely on conventional military force, Moscow employs a comprehensive spectrum of coercion to systematically dismantle the existing order from within. At the foundational domestic level, the Kremlin utilises hybrid warfare, subterfuge, and strategic corruption, to paralyse the internal cohesion of European states. This seamlessly feeds into the state-to-state and interregional levels, where Russia actively weaponises political friction to upset internal RSC dynamics and, for example, to aggressively block the institutional integration of Ukraine and Moldova into the Euro-Atlantic architecture. Concurrently, at the global level, Russia targets the overarching systemic structure by actively attempting to diminish the role of external global powers. By aggressively amplifying anti-US narratives and exploiting transatlantic divisions, the strategic objective remains the eventual eviction of US military forces from the EU RSC. By maintaining continuous pressure across these four interconnected levels, Moscow aims to induce the systemic collapse of the US-amplified EU-centred RSC architecture, thereby facilitating a cycle of “disassembly and reassembly”, so as to ultimately establish a Russia-centric super-complex hegemonic order.

The Counter-Balancing Coalition

The ultimate objective of Russia’s multilevel interference in the European security constellation is to structurally invert its polarity by transforming it from an EU-centred RSC into a unipolar superpower RSC, dominated by a Russian military-political hegemon. However, this contest for hegemony has instead had the unintended effect of accelerating the structural fusion of the continent through intense enmity towards Russia. As Buzan and Wæver argue, an RSC is “not defined by membership of

organisations or by agreement on belonging together. On the contrary, the most common way of being tied together is by negative dynamics, i.e., by being each other’s security problem”¹⁴. The full-scale invasion of 2022 cemented the European security complex into a single interdependent super-complex bound by permanent, reciprocal securitisation. As NATO operationalises its stringent regional defence plans and forward deployments, and as Russia transitions into a permanent war economy to sustain its attrition strategy, the two spheres have become inextricably linked by mutual containment. Within this new paradigm, Moscow and the Euro-Atlantic community are permanently locked together by the undeniable reality of being each other’s primary security problem.



At the foundational domestic level, the Kremlin utilises hybrid warfare, subterfuge, and strategic corruption, to paralyse the internal cohesion of European states

However, several critical factors currently hamper Russia’s ability to implement this ambitious revisionist strategy. First, Russia is increasingly exhibiting signs of strategic overstretch, driven by a volatile interplay between domestic economic constraints and global geopolitical dependencies. As the Russian state transitions into a permanent war economy, it faces severe macroeconomic trade-offs that have stifled broader economic stability throughout 2025 and 2026. Furthermore, its supply chain resilience and military manpower regeneration across multiple theatres are demonstrably faltering.

¹⁴ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.430.

The second factor impeding Moscow's grand design is the systemic militarisation and socio-political consolidation of Ukraine, which has successfully transformed into a genuine counter-balancer. Defying initial Kremlin calculations, Ukraine has utilised the period of war to forge a highly resilient state apparatus, emerging as one of the most capable and technologically adaptive land powers on the continent. This resilience is structurally underpinned by a vibrant national defence industry.

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Furthermore, the Ukrainian transformation is actively redrawing the external boundaries of the EU RSC. The formal integration of Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic defence-industrial complex demonstrates a profound shift in interregional dynamics. This structural fusion is no longer merely aspirational. The rapid adoption of the 150-billion-euro SAFE framework in May 2025, which explicitly incorporates Ukraine into joint European defence procurement, followed by the European Council's authorisation of a €90 billion defence and macro-financial loan for 2026-2027, has structurally embedded Kyiv in the EU security ecosystem. The deeper this integration proceeds, the more profoundly the Ukrainian transformation manifests itself¹⁵.

Consequently, altering the boundaries of the EU-centred RSC through Ukraine's accession irreversibly changes the balance of power between the European and Russia-centred complexes. Preventing Russia from executing its grand design and confining its status to that of a regional power rather than a superpower relies entirely on the consolidation of this structural counterweight. In RSCT terms, the EU and Ukraine are actively institutionalising a balancing counter-coalition. Therefore, Russia's primary strategic imperative remains that of violently disrupting this integration and neutralising Ukraine, before this Euro-Atlantic counter-coalition renders Moscow's hegemonic ambitions permanently unattainable.

Future Trajectories of the Super-complex

Further examination of the European regional security complex demands analysis of possible future trajectories of regional developments. Ondřej Ditrych and Martin Laryš¹⁶ proposed a host of scenario models. Two of their scenarios capture the structural tension at the heart of the super-complex: the "unstable balance model" and the "stable negative model".

Under the unstable balance model, "the regional conflict does not escalate into a regional war. Rather, it evolves into a stalemate, while the regime in Russia remains mostly the same as well as operational codes of the Russian elites..... The function of deterrence and the balance of power in the security management architecture remains precarious"¹⁷. In this scenario, Russia continues to build its

15 D. Panchuk, The Impact of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Public Support for EU Enlargement, *«Journal of European Public Policy»*, vol. 31, no. 10, 2024, p.3129.

16 O. Ditrych, M. Laryš, What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine?, *«European Security»*, May 2024, p.10.

17 O. Ditrych, M. Laryš, What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine?, *«European Security»*, May 2024, p.11.

victory strategy on its ability to critically impact Ukraine's morale and exploit war fatigue in the West. This scenario supports the possibility of Russia transforming into a superpower within the European RSC, but leaves the chance for the EU powers and Ukraine to form a counterbalance to keep Russian grand ambitions at bay. In this scenario, the key variable is the engagement of the external superpower, the US, in upholding the stability of the EU-centred RSC.



In an environment where the balance of power remains precarious and highly contingent on volatile US engagement, expedited Ukrainian accession to the European Union emerges as the paramount geopolitical imperative for the EU-centred RSC

Under the stable negative scenario¹⁸, however, “regional security order would be stabilised according to Russia’s geopolitical visions. In particular, this would entail Moscow’s significant increase of influence in the ‘in-between’ space. The catalyst of such a scenario would be Ukraine’s defeat as an alternative outcome of the war. [...] The peace (however) will be only a fleeting illusion. After a time, when Russia, with empowered ultra-nationalist hardliners in Putin’s close circle, would recover from its losses it would likely continue in its advance against the Ukraine ‘rump’ and possibly other post-Soviet targets”. Such a shift in the balance of power in Russia’s favour would translate into a rewriting of the European

security architecture, which would be characterised by greater Russian influence, and eventually lay the foundation for the demilitarisation of NATO’s Eastern flank, in line with Moscow’s proposals of December 2021¹⁹. A strategic victory for Moscow against Ukraine would bolster the Kremlin’s revisionist geopolitical conduct and produce more long-term instability in the regional security system, or lead to a model in which the centre of this system would be ordered on Moscow’s terms as a military-political superpower.

The Fast Track Integration Imperative

Mitigating the severe risks outlined in both the unstable balance model and stable negative model requires the EU to exercise decisive strategic agency, moving beyond reactive containment to structural consolidation. In an environment where the balance of power remains precarious and highly contingent on volatile US engagement, expedited Ukrainian accession to the European Union emerges as the paramount geopolitical imperative for the EU-centred RSC. Delaying integration perpetuates a dangerous and unfavourable status quo, leaving the shattered insulator state vulnerable to Moscow’s long-term strategy of attrition and continuous cross-domain coercion. Conversely, accelerated accession decisively limits the Kremlin’s core revisionist objectives. By formally extending the institutional, legal, and political boundaries of the EU project, including the mutual solidarity clauses inherent in the EU framework, Brussels can permanently anchor Ukraine within its security architecture. This would structurally neutralise the stable negative

18 O. Dityrych, M. Laryš, What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia’s War on Ukraine?, «European Security», May 2024, p.14.

19 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en, access: 11 May 2026].

scenario by rendering the demilitarisation of the Eastern flank and the expansion of the Russian sphere of influence institutionally unattainable.

Furthermore, neutralising Russia's strategy of exploiting Western war fatigue demands a shift from ad hoc military assistance to permanent structural integration. Accepting Ukraine on an expedited timeline is imperative for the EU's own security coherence. The unstable balance model assumes a protracted stalemate, a condition that has historically favoured the actor with a greater capacity for resource mobilisation. To sustain a credible counterbalancing coalition against a militarised Russian economy, the EU must fully integrate Ukraine's vast, battle-tested defence-industrial base, food-security weight, and critical raw-materials resources. An expedited integration would transform Ukraine from an external beneficiary of European financial instruments into an internal systemic engine of European strategic autonomy. By permanently fusing this potential, the EU and Ukraine can establish a resilient, self-sustaining economic bloc, capable of enduring prolonged systemic friction of the new regional security super-complex, thus eroding the economic viability of Moscow's revisionist grand strategy.

Conclusion

To conclude, the current power dynamics across the wider European continent demonstrate a rapid systemic rupture of the post-Cold War order. The architecture

of two distinct, compartmentalised RSCs has definitively collapsed, fusing the EU-centred and post-Soviet RSCs into a single, highly volatile RSC super-complex. This new structure is characterised by intense intractable interregional security dynamics and reciprocal securitisation. Maintaining the current balancing act cannot rely on tactical and reactive crisis management. It requires permanent strategic solutions and institutionalisation. Should the members of the EU-centred RSC fail to uphold this equilibrium, the system risks devolving into a unipolar superpower RSC dominated by Russian military-political hegemony. From the RSCT perspective, the defining variable in this securitisation contest is whether the European Union can exercise decisive strategic agency. Integrating Ukraine's battle-tested defence-industrial capacity and structural resilience is a foundational prerequisite for securing European strategic autonomy and permanently checking Russian revisionism.

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