Regional Neorealism: Rethinking Geography and Geopolitical Competition

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Neorealism, a cornerstone of international relations theory, is a comprehensive lens through which to analyse state behavior in a disordered world. States, whether driven by survival or ambition, are expected to balance power (Waltz 1979) or maximise it (Mearsheimer 2001), yielding predictable patterns of interaction across the global stage. Yet the empirical record disagrees, as geography and context muddy these theoretical waters. In the Arctic, a great power rivalry between the United States and China manifests as a quiet jostle for economic advantage. Oil exploration, rare earth mineral stakes, and tentative shipping lane claims play out without spiralling into direct confrontation. Contrast this with the South China Sea, where China constructs artificial islands and the United States conducts freedom-of-navigation operations (USCC 2016). Both regions pulse with systemic pressures and bipolar competition between superpowers, but one remains a cold standoff with little risk of serious escalation, the other a simmering flashpoint. Why does the same structural tension produce such starkly divergent outcomes?

This article proposes “regional neorealism,” a theoretical innovation that reframes neorealist spirals through the prism of geographic location and dynamic external pressures. Within this framework, a spiral refers to a self-reinforcing cycle of actions between states, where each action provokes an escalating response. Whilst this is based loosely on Jervis’ (1978) analysis of the security dilemma, where states’ defensive measures are misinterpreted as threats, regional neorealism expands the concept by emphasising how geography and resources shape the spiral’s trajectory, applicable to both offensive and defensive neorealism. This framework offers an innovative analysis of key cases: the Arctic, South China Sea, the Baltics, and Ukraine. It is grounded in neorealist roots whilst extending its reach to a world where an anarchical system derives from geographical locations and how they change. Regional neorealism offers not a rejection of neorealism, but a refinement, bringing both offensive and defensive schools together in harmony to produce a lens for a planet in flux.

Neorealist Foundations and Limitations

Neorealism stands as a dominant school in international relations theory, with its explanatory power rooted in the consequences of global anarchy. Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (1979) lays the foundation for defensive neorealism, arguing that the international order compels states to prioritise survival above all. Within this context, states are rational actors who calibrate their power to balance against external threats rather than squander their natural resources on ambition. Security dilemmas may emerge, wherein one state’s defensive buildup alarms another, sparking a spiral of mistrust, but Waltz suggests that mutual restraint often keeps extreme escalation in check (1979). The system’s structure, defined by polarity and power distribution, determines interaction outcomes: states seek only stability. John Mearsheimer’s *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) counters this with offensive neorealism, painting a much bleaker picture. Whilst it recognises anarchy, it suggests that it results in not just fear but opportunity; states will maximise power, pursuing domination whenever feasible. Offensive neorealism also suggests that survival demands this dominance, and restraint is a luxury. Where Waltz sees stalemates and instinctual survival, Mearsheimer sees struggles and opportunity – tension is not just an unfortunate exception but inevitable.

These two branches of neorealism have formed decades of scholarly debate, offering a robust toolkit for

understanding global dynamics. However, their strength fails when confronted with evidence of regional anomalies that defy their predictions. Take the Arctic, a theatre of great power rivalry that should, by offensive neorealist logic, hum with conflict. The United States and China vie for influence. Washington bolsters naval exercises near Alaska with Trump making a bid for Greenland, whilst Beijing pours investments into Greenland's rare earth mines and eyes the Northern Sea Route- yet militarisation and direct conflict remain absent (Volpe 2020). No American forces shadow Chinese freighters, and no Arctic Council meeting devolves into sabre-rattling. Instead, competition unfolds in economic terms: drilling contracts, mining bids, and diplomatic jostling over shipping rights (Østhagen 2017). Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism does not offer a plausible explanation here: if states maximise power relentlessly, why are there no Chinese bases on Svalbard, or no U.S. blockade of thawing passages? The Arctic's calm defies any expectation of unchecked rivalry (Heron 2025).

The Baltic region also showcases a primarily defensive dynamic, driven by economic interdependence and the realities of geography. The Baltic Sea features vital shipping lanes which have linked major ports like Gdansk, Stockholm, and St. Petersburg. These Baltic hubs are central to Northern European trade, creating a shared prosperity that hinges on stability. Disruption, say from direct conflict between its actors, would cut these routes, inflicting economic pain on all regional actors (Rostoks and Sprūds 2015). This interdependence results in states prioritising protection over active aggression. Geography reinforces this as the Baltic's shallow, island-strewn waters hinder large-scale offensive moves, favouring defensive tactics. Narrow naval passages, like the Danish Straits, amplify this as any attempt to dominate risks quick counteraction (Kasekamp & Rasmussen 2018). Territorial gains, such as seizing ports, promise little reward against the potential fallout: trade losses and reprisals. Even Russia's Kaliningrad has served more as a defensive anchor than a springboard, it is hemmed in by NATO neighbours. The result is a region where economic risk-taking is deterred by geographic spatial constraints. States focus on safeguarding their lanes and wealth, not expanding borders. This further aligns with defensive neorealism: the Baltic's blend of bustling commerce and unforgiving geography turns rivalry into restraint, proving that survival and stability trump territorial ambition.

Now, shift to the South China Sea, where offensive neorealism's predictions align more closely- we can see where defensive neorealism fails. China's arming of islands, which now host radar and runways, shows power maximisation; the U.S. responds with frequent patrols, sending destroyers through contested waters and reaffirming Taiwan's sovereignty (USCC 2016). Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism thrives in explaining this spiral of actions, which is partially driven by a compressed trade route and untapped natural reserves. The restraint of Waltz's defensive posture, however, offers no path to understanding these trends, as escalation is not avoided but embraced, and China is rewarded by continuously threatening smaller states and asserting military dominance in the region (Fravel 2011). Offensive neorealism, therefore, captures the South China Sea's heat but stumbles over the Arctic's chill, revealing a critical blind spot: its systemic lens assumes uniform behavior across diverse geographies.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine also epitomises an offensive spiral, where geographic proximity, border-drawn cultures, and resource stakes ignite aggressive power maximisation, exposing the limits of Waltz's defensive neorealism within different regions. The flat, open plains of eastern Ukraine, colliding with Russia's border, offer no natural barriers, unlike the Arctic's ice or the Baltic's choked sea routes. This lowers the cost of military action. This proximity, paired with Ukraine's fertile soil, vast grain exports, and strategic Black Sea ports like Odesa, fuels Russia's desire for regional dominance, not just survival (Charap and Colton 2017). Waltz's theory (1979) predicts that states balance power cautiously, restraining from escalatory action to preserve stability. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea and push into Donbas defy this very logic.

No security dilemma explains Moscow's territorial desire, it is a calculated offensive lunge. The absence of restraint that has led to tanks rolling and cities being shelled clashes with Waltz's vision of rational actors avoiding overreach. Instead, regional factors have amplified an offensive spiral: Ukraine's agricultural wealth and coastal access promise economic gain, whilst its position as a geopolitical hinge invites Russia to reshape its regional advantage. This aligns with offensive neorealism's ethos that power trumps stability, challenging Waltz by showing how local dynamics can override systemic caution in favour of conquest.

It would be shortsighted not to consider the changing nature of regional security when part of the issue with both

defensive and offensive neorealism is their rigidity. The Baltic Sea's current defensive spiral, for example, contrasts sharply with its past during the Cold War when the Soviet Union pursued aggressive expansionism in the region. This wasn't just about securing a buffer zone against NATO, geography determined both strategy and ideology. The Baltic's maritime access has fostered trade and alignment culturally with Western Europe, whilst Russia's vast interior encouraged a centralised control (Mackinder 1904). The USSR sought to overcome this cultural divide by extending its borders and forcefully exporting its Soviet values, which illustrated geography not just as a strategic asset but also as a tool for ideological domination and extension. This mirrors Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive neorealism: the Soviet goal wasn't just survival but the expansion of its values.

With the USSR's collapse, the region's dynamics shifted. The Baltic states turned to NATO and the EU, whilst geography, once a key factor in Soviet expansion, now limits Russian influence. Kaliningrad remains a militarised outpost, but it is isolated and boxed in by NATO neighbours (Åtland and Kabanenko 2020). This shift reinforces regional neorealism's core claim and the weakness in separating neorealist branches of theory: spirals are fluid, not rigid. They are shaped by geography's evolving role in strategy and culture.

Waltz acknowledges geography fleetingly, noting terrain as a modifier of capability (1979), but it is secondary to structure, and bipolarity or multipolarity is prioritised over place. Mearsheimer, on the other hand, prioritises power over context, assuming states exploit opportunities regardless of spatial constraints. Neither grapples with how isolation, like the Arctic's ice and vastness, stifles direct military escalation, nor how proximity, like the South China Sea's crowded reefs, stokes it. Nor do they account for dynamic shifts: climate change thaws Arctic routes and overpopulation increases resource claims, yet neorealism remains a static snapshot. These empirical anomalies are not just outliers but patterns that demand explanation. The Arctic's stability and the South China Sea's volatility underscore a truth that neorealism misses: geography shapes strategic choice.

Regional neorealism steps into this breach. It preserves neorealism's core that anarchy is constant but posits that regional conditions determine whether defensive or offensive spirals dominate. The Arctic's harshness raises the cost of aggression; the South China Sea's density lowers it. External pressures such as climate, and population reshape these theatres, tilting trajectories towards either end of the offensive/ defensive spectrum over time. This intervention refines neorealism, not by rejecting its key schools, but by grounding them in place and change, offering a framework to decode the riddle of regional differences.

Regional neorealism emerges as a theoretical framework to explain why state behaviour changes across regions and how global shifts might redraw security patterns. It builds on neorealism's foundation that states are rational actors in an anarchic system but pivots to argue that geographic location and environmental pressures, not just systemic structure, decide whether defensive or offensive spirals prevail. This framework features three interlocking principles: geographic determinism, regional variation, dynamic shifts, and resource primacy. It offers a lens to decode current anomalies and anticipate future interactions, introducing the concepts of spiral types and dynamic modifiers, making the two distinct schools of neorealism less rigid.

Types of Spirals, Dynamic Modifiers, and the Three Key Principles of Regional Neorealism

Security spirals capture the motion of action and reaction that defines state competition, where actions intended to ensure a state's safety are interpreted as threats, leading to countermeasures that escalate the tensions they wanted to avoid. As opposed to the security dilemma (Jervis 1978), this term describes the fluidity of state competition on a spectrum of offensive and defensive behaviours, as these spirals are not uniform or predetermined. They morph according to regional dynamics, with geography, resource stakes, and natural vulnerabilities deciding whether competition is militarised confrontation or channels into cautious defensive behaviour. In some regions, logistical barriers and economic interdependence raise the cost of escalatory action, encouraging a slower, more defensive spiral where states prioritise stability. Elsewhere, proximity and resource density amplify the rewards of assertiveness, accelerating an aggressive spiral.

Defensive spirals often feature economic rivalry and restraint over military clashes. The conditions that lead to this are physical geographic barriers (ice, mountains, oceans), which result in the higher cost of aggression. The Arctic

exemplifies this spiral. U.S.-China tensions simmer over economic spoils, with American firms vying for oil leases and China funding mines, but the region's harsh climate and vast distances deter full-scale militarisation. Whilst Russia maintains bases along its Arctic coast, there has been no contemporary risk of direct conflict, especially compared to other regions. The Arctic Council mediates resource talks, not war talks. Isolation consistently enforces this defensive posture.

On the other hand, offensive spirals are characterised by power maximisation, militarised posturing, and intense territorial disputes. Certain conditions lead to these circumstances: proximity, resource density, overlapping claims, and non-physical geographically defined conditions such as cultural projection. The South China Sea embodies this spiral. China stations military equipment across islands, arming them with radar and runways; the U.S. counters with naval patrols (Aquilino 2022). The proximity of ships passing within sight amplifies every move, whilst fisheries, oil, and overlapping trade routes stoke economic stakes higher than in remote regions. Offensive dynamics win because of the specific characteristics of the region, with states pushing the edge of dominance.

Differing regions are marked by change, whether that be in terms of human population or geographical shifts. Regional neorealism, therefore, calls for the recognition of dynamic modifiers, which can shift the balance between defensive and offensive neorealist explanations. The chief dynamic modifier that several regions face is climate change. It has been predicted that the Arctic could be ice-free by 2040 (World Economic Forum 2017). This melt could significantly reduce shipping times via the Northern Sea Route, inviting naval presence and flipping it towards offensive spirals. This also poses a risk to regions already vulnerable to offensive spirals, as offensive behaviour becomes more rewarding. Overpopulation also plays a key role as a dynamic modifier. For example, demand for fish in the South China Sea or minerals in the Arctic pressures states to actively secure control over potential rivals (Zhang & Bateman, 2017). The advancement of technology must also be recognised as a dynamic modifier in neorealist thought. Advances in seabed mining or Arctic drilling shift economic incentives, potentially militarising what were once defensive zones.

Geographic determinism is at the core of regional neorealism's three key principles: geography is not a passive stage but a key active shaper of state strategy and security. Isolation, like the Arctic's sprawling ice fields and exhaustive distances, imposes steep costs on military action. This tilts states toward defensive postures, where existence is through restraint rather than expansion. Proximity, as in the South China Sea's tight reefs and shipping lanes, shrinks the buffer between rivals, lowering the bar for escalation and fostering offensive behaviours. Terrain, distance, and cultural boundaries are drivers of state security and behaviours. Geography also influences access to resources, and in the South China Sea, fisheries, hydrocarbons, and a vital trade artery blend economic and territorial motivations, igniting militarised rivalry. However, this is by no means the only driving factor resulting from geography. The expansion and protection of culture and differing political systems, contained within and as a result of geographic boundaries, also drive state competition. This is particularly true when also aided by geographical proximity, such as in the case of Ukraine and the former Soviet Union. Regional neorealism insists that place dictates how states behave.

The second principle of regional variation means that rivalries such as the U.S. and China filter through regional prisms, which result in different outcomes. In the Arctic, vastness and harsh terrain diffuse tension into economic channels: ExxonMobil bids against Chinese firms for oil patches, not warships (Ruskin 2023). The same geopolitical rivalry in the South China Sea cedes territorial and military flashpoints- China's Spratly and Taiwan disputes result in U.S. naval activity. Neorealism's spirals are therefore not universal; the context of each region shapes them. The principles behind security activity may hold in one region but collapse in another, demanding a theory that recognises this diverse reality.

Regional neorealism also emphasises the importance of dynamic shifts, as regions do not remain still; climate change and overpopulation act as changing forces, reshaping the conditions which decide state behaviour over time. Melting Arctic ice unlocks shipping routes like the Northwest Passage and exposes rare earth minerals in Greenland, eroding the factors that sustain its defensive spirals. Rising global populations are projected to reach nearly 10 billion by 2050 (UN 2025). This amplifies the demand for energy, food, and materials, pressuring states to secure zones that were once out of reach. These shifts rewrite the geopolitical climate, potentially flipping stable regions into

contested ones where defensive neorealist explanations lose to offensive neorealism. Those factors which geography determines can be unraveled by environment and demography. This means that offensive and defensive neorealism do not constitute rigid definitions but that state security behaviour exists on a spectrum where both are relevant.

Conclusion: A World in Flux

Regional neorealism emerges not as a rejection of traditional neorealism but as an essential refinement. It maintains neorealism's core that states navigate an anarchic world but asserts that geography and evolving external forces dictate whether defensive or offensive spirals prevail. The Arctic and South China Sea exemplify this duality: one frozen in economic rivalry, the other ablaze with territorial confrontation. Yet both may move on the neorealist spectrum as climate change, population pressures, and technological advances dismantle regional dimensions. The Arctic's ice shield melts; the South China Sea's maritime traffic swells, with each shift recalibrating strategic incentives and capabilities, inviting rising contestation. In this evolving landscape, regional neorealism offers a comprehensive predictive compass. It anticipates that previously stable regions may destabilise, whilst today's flashpoints could escalate further.

As geography shifts and new regions emerge, such as Antarctica, the deep seabed, and even outer space, the framework adapts, ensuring that neorealism remains resilient in a future likely defined by environmental upheaval and technological leaps. For scholars and policymakers alike, regional neorealism sharpens the analytic realist lens on strategic behaviour. It equips international relations and security studies with a theory that accounts for location, change, and systemic force- one that decodes regional anomalies and forecasts the shifting of global rivalry. The Arctic's calm may be temporary, and the South China Sea's tensions may intensify, but the logic of regional neorealism endures: geography shapes strategy, and as geography changes, so too will the spirals of security action.

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