

THE POLITICS OF WHEAT: THE CONDITIONS FOR RUSSIAN WHEAT DIPLOMACY AFTER THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Saeyoon Sim | Mentored by Francine Barchett, PhD

Abstract

The Russo-Ukrainian War disrupted global wheat markets while solidifying Russia’s relative importance as the world’s leading wheat exporter, raising the question of whether Russia’s expanded role in global wheat trade translated into diplomatic leverage for the country and, if so, under what conditions. This paper examines this question by proposing a framework centered on three conditioning variables: high dependence on Russian wheat, limited availability of alternative suppliers, and substantial domestic political pressure from rising food prices and insecurity. Using a structured literature review and comparative case analysis of Egypt and Jordan, the paper evaluates whether these conditions correspond with greater opportunities for Russian wheat-related diplomatic influence. The comparison finds that Egypt, which exhibited high dependence, fewer alternatives, and significant domestic political pressure surrounding food, incorporated wheat more prominently into high-level diplomatic engagement with Russia. By contrast, Jordan’s greater supplier diversification and strategic wheat reserves reduced its vulnerability to Russia despite its broader dependence on imported wheat. These findings support the paper’s central argument that although agricultural commodity power does not automatically produce diplomatic influence, it creates opportunities for greater bargaining capacity when the conditioning variables converge. The study therefore demonstrates how agricultural trade can function as a form of economic statecraft and provides a framework for understanding the geopolitical significance of food commodities during future supply disruptions.

Introduction

Necessity of Research

- Ukraine’s wheat exports fell 44% between 2021 and 2022, while Russia’s exports were forecast to increase by 36% in 2022/23 (USDA, 2023).
- Although research has examined the war’s effects on food security and commodities as economic statecraft, these literatures are often discussed separately.

Research Question

To what extent did the Russo-Ukrainian War transform wheat exports into a source of diplomatic leverage for Russia and if so, under what conditions was that leverage most effective?

Methods & Case Selection

This paper paired a structured literature review with a comparative case analysis.

Source Selection

Sources comprised of peer-reviewed, academic literature as well as data and reports from the FAO, USDA, WTO, and national ministries.

Case Selection

- Egypt: high dependence on Russian wheat case
- Jordan: low dependence on Russian wheat case
- Compared across four dimensions: Russian wheat dependence, alternative suppliers, domestic food pressure, and diplomatic evidence.

Conceptual Framework

Russian wheat dominance creates leverage potential, but does not guarantee influence. The combination of high dependence, limited alternatives, and domestic food-price pressure makes diplomatic leverage more likely.

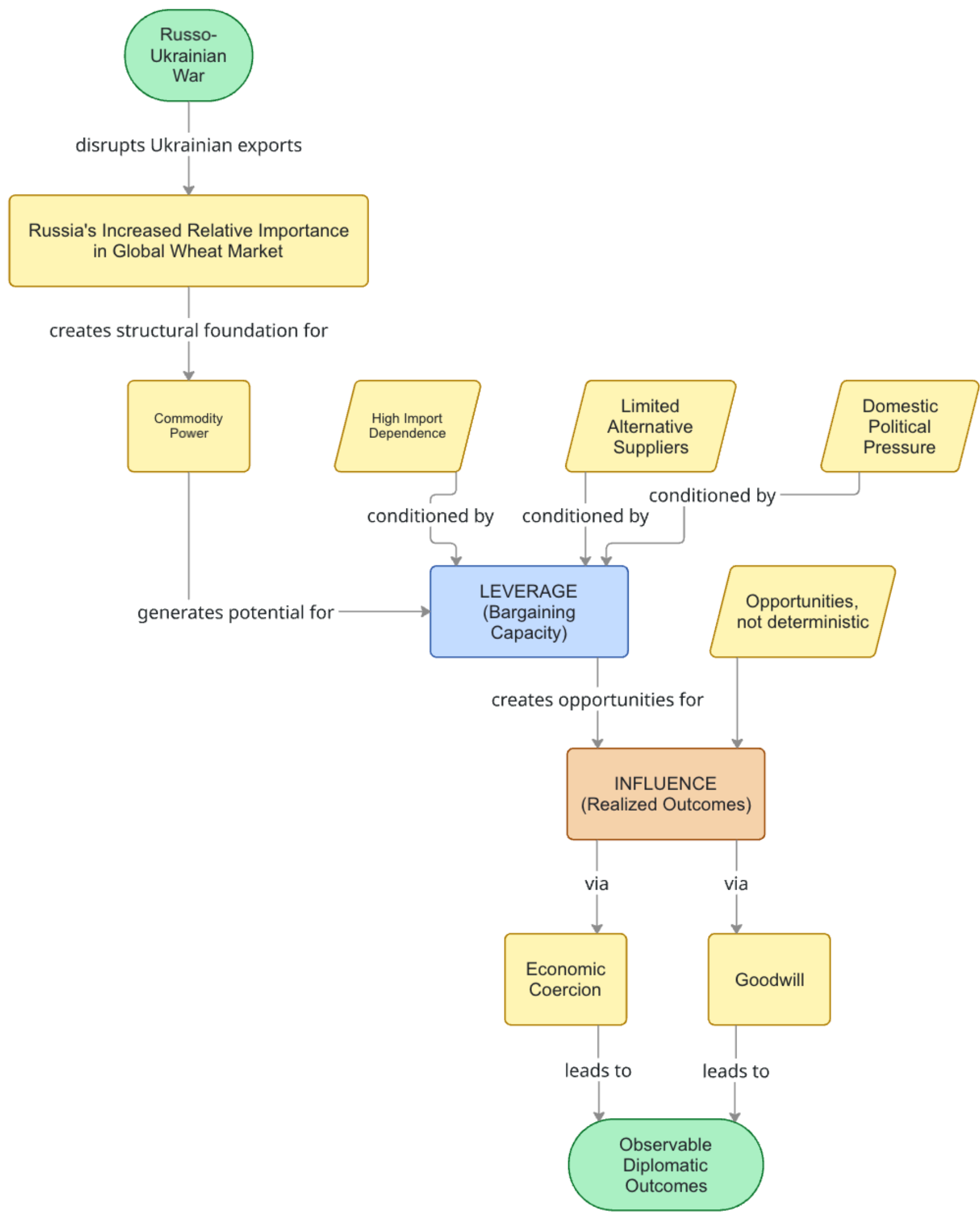


Figure 1. Proposed Mechanism Linking Russian Wheat Trade to Diplomatic Leverage
Leverage is expected to emerge when dependence, limited alternatives, and domestic political pressure converge (Hellegers, 2022).

Comparative Findings

Dimension	Egypt	Jordan	Interpretation
Dependence on Russian wheat	High: Russia supplied a large majority (56%) of Egypt's wheat imports.	Low: Jordan's wheat supply was more diversified, with Russia accounting for a smaller share.	Russia-specific exposure was substantially greater in Egypt.
Availability of alternative suppliers	Russia was a dominant supplier, making replacement more difficult.	Instead of Russia, Jordan turned to Romania as its primary partner and relied on domestic reserves, reducing reliance on Russian wheat.	Fewer alternatives increase Russia's bargaining capacity.
Domestic political pressure	Bread prices and wheat availability are politically sensitive because of Egypt's large subsidized-bread system.	Wheat and bread prices are also politically sensitive, but Jordan's greater supplier diversification reduces Russia-specific vulnerability.	Political pressure increases the cost of supply disruption, strengthening potential leverage.
Observed diplomatic influence	Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov assured the Egyptian government that Russian wheat would continue steady shipments.	Although Foreign Minister Lavrov and Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi met, wheat was not explicitly mentioned in public discussions.	Wheat was a focal issue in discussions when dependence on Russian wheat was high. However, leverage is not interchangeable with influence; influence requires an observable change in state behavior.

Table 1. Conditions for Russian Wheat Leverage Compared
Comparison across the paper's three conditioning variables and observed diplomatic evidence.
(MFA Russia; Ministry of Industry and Trade)

Policy Implications & Conclusion

- Reduce vulnerability:** Diversify suppliers, maintain strategic reserves, and strengthen domestic production where feasible.
- Conditions matter:** High dependence, limited alternatives, and domestic food-price pressure made wheat-related leverage more feasible instead of automatic.
- Implications:** Wheat gains geopolitical power not just from supply dominance, but from how difficult it is to replace and how costly disruption is for importers.
- Future relevance:** These conditions should be considered when assessing vulnerability during future commodity crises.

References

- Agriculture Marketing Service. Ukraine Grain Transportation Executive Summary. U.S. Department of Agriculture , June 2023, <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/UkraineJune2023.pdf>.
- Hellegers, Petra. "Food Security Vulnerability Due to Trade Dependencies on Russia and Ukraine." Food Security, vol. 14, July 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-022-01306-8>.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with RT, Moscow, December 25, 2017* . 25 Dec. 2017, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1560452/.
- Ministry of Industry and Trade. "Wheat Stocks Are Secure and Sufficient for 15 Months." *Mit.Gov.Jo*, 2023, <https://www.mit.gov.jo/AR/NewsDetails>.