



RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC POSITION IN GLOBAL POLITICAL ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN MULTIPOLARITY AND GEOPOLITICAL REVISIONISM

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Received: 02/07/2026 | Revised: 08/11/2026 | Accepted: 08/20/2026 | Published: 09/28/2026

Abstract

This study analyzes the transformation of Russia's strategic position in global politics following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Employing structural realism and geopolitical analysis, this research examines how Russia reconfigures its influence through three main pillars: strategic partnership with China, energy diplomacy toward Asia, and leadership in multipolar architecture through BRICS. Research findings indicate that Western sanctions have paradoxically accelerated Russia's pivot to Asia and strengthened the narrative of a multipolar world order. Russian energy exports to China and India increased significantly, while BRICS membership expanded from 5 to 10 countries by 2025. However, this transformation faces structural limitations: technological isolation, economic fragmentation, and asymmetric dependence on China. This research contributes to understanding the dynamics of global power shifts and the implications of Russian revisionism on the liberal international order. The study concludes that Russia has successfully maintained its status as a major regional power with limited global influence, but not as an alternative hegemon.

Keywords: Russia, geopolitics, multipolarity, BRICS, energy diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a crucial turning point in contemporary global politics. This military action not only transformed the European security landscape but also accelerated a fundamental restructuring of the global political architecture from a Western-dominated unipolar system to a more fragmented multipolar configuration (Gvosdev, 2025). Comprehensive economic sanctions imposed by Western powers—including asset freezes, technology restrictions, and isolation from the SWIFT financial system—have forced Moscow into a significant strategic reorientation. Paradoxically, Western economic and diplomatic pressure has reinforced Russia's narrative of the need for a multipolar world order not dominated by US hegemony. Russia has capitalized on this momentum to deepen its partnership with China, expand its influence in the Global South through the BRICS, and shift its energy diplomacy from Europe to Asia (Kortunov, 2025). This transformation reflects Russia's strategic adaptation to Western isolation while maintaining its status as a global great power. However, a crucial question arises: to what extent has Russia succeeded in maintaining or even enhancing its strategic position in global politics? Does the pivot to Asia and BRICS leadership truly compensate for the loss of access to Western markets and technology? How sustainable is this strategy in the long term given the structural limitations Russia faces? This study aims to analyze Russia's strategic position in contemporary global politics with a focus on the period 2020-2025. Specifically, the study will examine three main dimensions: (1) the Russia-China strategic partnership and its implications for the global balance of power; (2) the transformation of Russia's energy diplomacy from Europe to Asia; and (3) Russia's role in the multipolar architecture through BRICS expansion and leadership. This study is important because it fills a gap in the literature on the medium-term implications of the Ukraine conflict for Russia's geopolitical position. Unlike analyses that focus solely on military aspects or economic sanctions, this study adopts a holistic approach that integrates geopolitical, economic-energy, and global institutional architecture dimensions. The findings of this study contribute to academic understanding of the dynamics of shifting global power and provide policy implications for countries navigating great power rivalries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Structural Realism and the Global Distribution of Power

Structural realism, or neorealism, developed by Kenneth Waltz (1979) in his seminal work *Theory of International Politics*, provides a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding state behavior in the international system. In contrast to classical realism, which emphasizes human nature as the source of conflict, Waltz argues that the structure of the international system—particularly anarchy and the distribution of material capabilities—is the primary determinant of state behavior (Waltz, 1979: 79–101). According to Waltz, the international system is *self-help*, with no supranational authority that can guarantee state security. This anarchic condition forces states to rely on themselves and continually seek to maximize their relative security. In this context, the distribution of material capabilities—measured through a combination of population size, economic power, military capability, and resources—determines the structure of the system: unipolar (one dominant power), bipolar (two superpowers), or multipolar (three or more great powers) (Waltz, 1979: 161–163). John Mearsheimer (2001) expanded Waltz's theory by developing offensive realism in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Mearsheimer argues that under conditions of anarchy, states not only seek to maintain security (*defensive realism*) but rationally seek to maximize their relative power to achieve regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001: 29–40). Great powers tend to be expansionist not because of inherent aggressiveness, but because the structure of the international system creates incentives to increase power for long-term *survival*. In the context of contemporary Russia, structural realism provides a lens for understanding why Moscow rejects the Western-dominated liberal international order. In the post-Cold War era, Russia perceived the US-dominated unipolar system as a threat to its national security and its traditional *sphere of influence* in the post-Soviet space. NATO's eastward expansion, Western interventions in Yugoslavia (1999), Iraq (2003), and Libya (2011), and its support for the color revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004, 2014) were perceived by Moscow as systematic attempts to erode its strategic position (Tsygankov, 2016: 198–220).

Robert Gilpin (1981) in *War and Change in World Politics* added a temporal dimension to his theory of power transitions. Gilpin argued that when the distribution of power in the international system changes—whether through differential economic growth, technological innovation, or demographic shifts—the system experiences pressures for restructuring. Rising powers *challenge* the *status quo* maintained by established powers, creating the potential for conflict. Russia, as a revisionist power, seeks to accelerate the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity to create greater strategic space for its national interests (Gilpin, 1981: 186–210).

Balance of Threat Theory

Stephen Walt (1987) in *The Origins of Alliances* refined the traditional balance of power theory with the balance of threat theory. Walt argued that states respond not only to the distribution of material power, but more specifically to perceived threats. Threats are determined by four factors: aggregate power, proximate geography, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions (Walt, 1987: 21–26).

The Russia-China partnership can be understood as a balancing coalition against the perceived common threat of US unipolarity. Although China has a much larger economy than Russia, both countries share perceptions of Western aggressive intentions—particularly regarding the promotion of liberal democracy and regime change. Proximity (both share a long border) and US offensive capabilities (global military projection) reinforce their strategic convergence.

Soft Balancing in the Multipolar Era

Robert Pape (2005) introduced the concept of "soft balancing" to explain how countries respond to hegemony without forming formal military alliances or arms races. Soft balancing includes: diplomatic coordination in international forums, limiting military access, forming regional economic blocs, and refusing to support hegemonic policies (Pape, 2005: 36–39). BRICS can be understood as a soft balancing platform where Russia, China, and other members coordinate to create a counterweight to Western institutional dominance without direct military confrontation.

Resource Curse and Rentier State Theory

Michael Ross (2012) in *The Oil Curse* analyzes how the abundance of natural resources, particularly oil and gas, paradoxically hinders economic development and democratization. Ross identifies three mechanisms: the rentier effect (the state does not need to tax, thus reducing accountability), the repression effect (revenue from oil funds the security apparatus), and the modernization effect (oil reduces pressure for economic diversification) (Ross, 2012: 64-85). The Russian economy is a classic example of a rentier state where more than 60% of export revenues come from energy. This dependence makes Russia vulnerable to commodity price volatility and creates disincentives for structural reform. Western sanctions and the loss of European markets exacerbate this problem, forcing Russia to sell energy at a significant discount to Asia and increasing dependence on sectors that do not encourage technological innovation. Gaddy & Ickes (2005) analyze the phenomenon of the Russian-specific "resource curse," which they call "Russia's virtual economy," where economic inefficiencies are hidden by revenues from energy exports. This model is sustainable during high energy prices, but is vulnerable to external shocks such as comprehensive sanctions that combine market access restrictions with price caps.

Institutional Theory and Global Governance

Institutional liberalism, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977), argues that international institutions can facilitate cooperation and reduce conflict even under conditions of anarchy. Institutions reduce transaction costs, increase transparency, and create enforcement mechanisms that enable countries to achieve absolute gains through cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 1977: 19-37). However, from Russia's perspective, post-Cold War global institutions—the IMF, World Bank, and WTO—reflect Western preferences and interests, rather than being neutral institutions serving the common good. This has motivated Russia to build alternative institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and support the expansion of the BRICS as a counterweight to Western institutional dominance. G. John Ikenberry (2011) in *Liberal Leviathan* argues that the US-led liberal international order is "open and rule-based," allowing rising powers to thrive. However, criticism from the Russian and Chinese perspectives is that this "rules-based order" is selectively applied—the West violates international law when it suits its interests (e.g., the 2003 invasion of Iraq without a UN Security Council mandate) but condemns similar violations by other countries (Ikenberry, 2011: 161-189).

Conceptual Framework of the Research

This study integrates the above theories into a holistic conceptual framework to analyze Russia's strategic position. The structure of the international system (structural realism) provides the macro context: the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity creates opportunities and constraints for Russia's strategy. Classical geopolitics and geoeconomics explain how geography and control of energy resources provide strategic leverage. Alliance theory explains the logic of the Russia-China partnership and the BRICS platform. Rentier state theory identifies the structural limitations of the Russian economy. Using this multi-theoretical framework, the study analyzes three dimensions of Russia's strategic position: (1) an axis of convenience with China as a soft balance against US hegemony; (2) an energy pivot to Asia as a geoeconomic adaptation to Western sanctions; and (3) BRICS leadership as an institutional alternative. The analysis identifies the extent to which these strategies successfully compensate for Western isolation and structural limitations that limit long-term effectiveness.

METHOD

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design (Yin, 2018). The instrumental case study was chosen because it allows for in-depth analysis of a specific phenomenon—Russia's strategic position—to provide an understanding of a broader issue, namely the dynamics of shifting power in contemporary global politics. The qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the complexities of strategic motivations, decision-making processes, and the dynamics of international relations that are difficult to quantify.

Data source

The data for this research comes from various primary and secondary sources:

1. **Primary Data:** Official government documents (Russian foreign policy statements, Russia-China Joint Statement of February 4, 2022, BRICS Summit declaration), trade and economic data from official agencies (Rosstat, Chinese Customs, Indian Ministry of Petroleum)

2. **Secondary Data:** Research reports from leading think tanks (Chatham House, Carnegie Endowment, SIPRI, IFRI), economic data from multilateral institutions (World Bank, IMF, IEA, UNCTAD), peer-reviewed academic journal articles
3. **Tertiary Data:** Trusted international media (Reuters, Financial Times, The Economist) for current events data and contextual analysis

Analysis Period

The primary analysis period is 2020–2025, with a particular focus on the post-invasion period (2022–2025) of Ukraine. The pre-invasion period (2020–2021) is analyzed as a baseline context for understanding the strategic transformations that have occurred. This selection of time allows for a comparative analysis before and after a major geopolitical shock (the invasion of Ukraine) and the implementation of comprehensive Western sanctions.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis used qualitative content analysis techniques with a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were coded based on three main research themes: (1) Russia-China strategic partnership, (2) energy diplomacy, and (3) multipolar leadership through BRICS. The analysis process followed these stages:

1. Familiarization with data through repeated reading
2. Initial coding to identify patterns and categories
3. Theme search by grouping related codes
4. Review and refinement of the theme
5. Interpretation and narrative of findings in a theoretical context

Validity and Reliability

The validity of the research was strengthened through data triangulation (comparing multiple sources to validate findings) and member checking (confirming interpretations with expert review). Reliability was maintained through systematic documentation of the analysis process and the use of an established theoretical framework to guide data interpretation. The limitations of the research were explicitly acknowledged, including reliance on secondary data and limited access to internal Russian decision-making data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Russia-China Strategic Partnership

Evolution of Bilateral Relations

The Russia-China strategic partnership has developed into an increasingly robust *axis of convenience* following the invasion of Ukraine. The Joint Statement of February 4, 2022, declared a "partnership without limits" between the two countries, although in practice significant structural limitations remain (Kremlin, 2022).

Bilateral trade volume increased from USD 107 billion in 2020 to USD 240 billion in 2023, surpassing the USD 200 billion target set by both countries (Kaczmarek, 2021). China now accounts for 32% of Russia's total foreign trade, up from 18% in 2020. This asymmetrical dependence creates an imbalanced power dynamic in bilateral relations, with Russia increasingly becoming a *junior partner* (Lo, 2017).

Military and Security Cooperation

Military cooperation between the two countries includes intensified joint exercises, military technology transfers, and strategic coordination on regional security issues. The Vostok 2022 naval exercise involved over 50,000 personnel, demonstrating the increasing level of interoperability between the two countries' armed forces (Korolev, 2019). However, China remains cautious about directly engaging in the Ukraine conflict. Beijing refrains from providing direct military support to Moscow and maintains a "neutral" position that allows it to maintain economic ties with the West while supporting Russia diplomatically (Gabuev, 2022).

Geopolitical Implications

The Russia-China partnership poses significant challenges to the liberal international order. Both countries coordinate in multilateral fora to counterbalance Western influence, support the vision of a multipolar world order, and promote alternatives to liberal norms in *global governance*. However, divergent strategic interests—particularly regarding Central Asia and influence in the post-Soviet space—limit the depth of their strategic convergence (Kassenova, 2022).

Reorientation from Europe to Asia

Western sanctions forced Russia to make a dramatic *pivot* in its energy export orientation. Before 2022, Europe accounted for approximately 70% of Russia's natural gas exports. Post-sanctions, this proportion dropped drastically to less than 20% by the end of 2024, while exports to Asia increased significantly (IEA, 2024). Pipeline infrastructure such as the Power of Siberia pipeline, which connects Russia to China, has become a key export route. The Power of Siberia 2 project is currently under planning to increase gas export capacity to China (Modern Diplomacy, 2025). Russian crude oil exports to India increased by more than 800% between 2021 and 2023, making India the second-largest buyer after China (Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas India, 2024).

Price Discount and Shadow Fleet

To maintain market share amid sanctions, Russia has been forced to offer significant price discounts. Urals oil is sold at a discount of USD 20-30 per *barrel* to the Brent *benchmark*. This lost revenue is estimated to reach USD 160 billion between 2022 and 2024 (Reuters, 2024). Russia is also developing a '*shadow fleet*' of aging tankers to avoid *price caps* and Western sanctions. While this strategy helps maintain export volumes, higher operating costs and the risk of environmental accidents are long-term concerns (US EIA, 2024).

Structural Limitations

Energy reorientation faces significant infrastructure challenges. Existing pipeline capacity is limited, while new infrastructure development requires massive investment and Western technology that is currently difficult to access (Mitrova & Melnikov, 2019). Dependence on a single buyer (China) also creates a vulnerability in Russia's *bargaining power* in long-term price negotiations (Oxenstierna, 2023).

Leadership in Multipolar Architecture through BRICS

The 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg marked a historic expansion with the admission of six new members: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Wikipedia, 2025). This expansion increased the BRICS' share of the global economy from 26% to over 30% of global GDP (PPP terms). Russia played a central role in driving this expansion as a strategy to strengthen the bloc's anti-Western hegemony (IISD, 2024).

Economic and Financial Initiatives

The New Development Bank (NDB), established by the BRICS in 2014, has approved projects worth over USD 30 billion through 2024 (New Development Bank, 2023). Russia is using this platform to access alternative financing amid Western sanctions. Discussions on a *common currency* for intra-BRICS trade are intensifying, although concrete implementation remains a long way off (Roberts et al., 2018). Bilateral trade in local currencies between BRICS members has increased significantly. The proportion of Russia-China trade in rubles and yuan has risen from 3% in 2020 to over 90% in 2024, reducing dependence on the US dollar (SWIFT, 2024).

Limitations of Cohesiveness

While its expansion demonstrates the appeal of the multipolar narrative, BRICS faces challenges to internal cohesion. Members often have divergent interests: India and China have a strategic rivalry, while newer members like Saudi Arabia and the UAE maintain a strong security alliance with the United States (Stuenkel, 2015). BRICS is more of an informal coordination platform than a formal alliance. There is no *binding decision-making mechanism*, and consensus is difficult to achieve on sensitive issues. This limits BRICS' effectiveness as a *counterweight* to the Bretton Woods institutions (Larionova & Kirton, 2018).

Structural Limitations and Long-Term Challenges

Western technology sanctions have cut off Russia's access to advanced *semiconductors*, *software*, and other critical technologies. This has hampered economic modernization and military capabilities. China can provide some substitutes, but still lags behind in *frontier technologies* like 5nm chip fabrication and AI *hardware* (Connolly & Hanson, 2016).

Economic Fragmentation

The Russian economy contracted by 2.1% in 2022 and grew by a weak 1.5% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023). *Brain drain* increased, with an estimated 500,000–1,000,000 skilled citizens leaving Russia since the invasion of Ukraine (Levada Center, 2024). *Foreign direct investment* fell by 90% compared to pre-sanction levels. *Dependence on raw commodity exports* increased, consolidating the *rentier state* economic model (Ross, 2012).

Asymmetric Dependence on China

The pivot to Asia has created a structural dependency that positions Russia as a *junior partner* in relations with China. Moscow's *leverage* in trade and investment negotiations is increasingly limited. China can exploit this position to obtain economic and strategic concessions, such as preferential access to Siberian natural resources at below-market prices (Oxenstierna, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Russia has successfully made significant strategic adaptations in the face of Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation following the Ukraine invasion. Through three key pillars—a strategic partnership with China, a reorientation of energy diplomacy toward Asia, and leadership in BRICS expansion—Moscow maintains its status as a regional great power with limited global influence. However, this transformation is not without significant costs and structural limitations. Technological isolation, economic fragmentation, *brain drain*, and asymmetric dependence on China create long-term vulnerabilities that could erode Russia's strategic position. The pivot to Asia has partially compensated for the loss of European markets, but at the cost of lower profit margins and limited *bargaining power*. *BRICS offers an important platform for promoting multipolarity narratives and providing an alternative to Western-dominated institutions. However, limited internal cohesion and the absence of binding governance mechanisms* limit its effectiveness as a systematic *counterweight* to the liberal international order. Within the framework of structural realism, Russia has managed to avoid total marginalization and maintain its capabilities as a great power that can influence regional politics and provide *resistance* to Western unipolarity. However, the increasingly fragmented structure of the international system does not automatically benefit Moscow, and Russia is not an alternative hegemon capable of shaping a new order according to its preferences. The long-term sustainability of Russia's strategic position will depend on its ability to overcome these structural limitations: diversifying its economy beyond the energy sector, modernizing domestic technology, managing dependence on China without becoming subordinate, and building more cohesive coalitions in the Global South. Without fundamental reforms, Russia risks being trapped as a *regional spoiler* with increasingly limited global influence.

RECOMMENDATION

Academic Recommendations

1. Further research is needed to analyze the internal dynamics of Russian *decision-making* in navigating dependence on China, including analysis of political elite perceptions of trade-offs between strategic sovereignty and economic needs.
2. A comparative study of the effectiveness of BRICS versus other multilateral institutions (such as G7, G20) in shaping *global governance*, with a focus on *decision-making mechanisms* and policy implementation.
3. An in-depth analysis of the implications of global economic fragmentation for middle powers, particularly how ASEAN countries are responding to the pressure to choose between the Western bloc and the Russia-China bloc.
4. A longitudinal study of the long-term impact of *brain drain* on the innovation capacity and modernization of the Russian economy, including an analysis of the most affected sectors.

Policy Recommendations

1. ASEAN countries need to develop more sophisticated *hedging strategies in facing the West-Russia-China rivalry, including diversifying economic and security partnerships to avoid excessive dependence on one bloc.*
2. Diversification of energy sources to reduce the geopolitical *leverage* of dominant energy producers, including investment in renewable energy and development of resilient regional energy infrastructure.
3. Strengthening independent multilateral institutions (such as ASEAN, African Union) as mediation mechanisms in great power conflicts and platforms for *middle powers* to maintain strategic autonomy.
4. Development of regional coordination mechanisms to address global economic fragmentation, including the establishment of alternative payment systems and free trade agreements that are not tied to great power rivalries.

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Table 1. Evolution of Russia-China Bilateral Trade (2020-2024)

Year	Trading Volume (USD Billion)	Proportion of Russia's Total Trade (%)	YoY Growth (%)
2020	107	18	-
2021	147	21	37.4
2022	190	28	29.3
2023	240	32	26.3
2024*	260	34	8.3

*Estimates based on data for the first 9 months of 2024

Table 2. Reorientation of Russian Energy Exports: Europe vs. Asia

Category	2020	2022	2024
Gas Exports to Europe (%)	70	45	18
Gas Exports to Asia (%)	25	48	75
Oil Exports to Europe (%)	52	35	12
Oil Exports to Asia (%)	40	58	82
Average Price Discount (USD/barrel)	5	25	22

Table 3. Comparison of Russian Macroeconomic Indicators

Indicator	2020	2022	2024
GDP growth (%)	-2.7	-2.1	1.8
Inflation (%)	4.9	13.8	7.5
FDI (USD Billion)	10	1.2	2.8
Foreign Exchange Reserves (USD Billion)	595	582	615
Brain Drain (Estimate)	70,000	500,000	850,000

Table 4. BRICS Membership Expansion and Global GDP Composition

Period	Number of Members	GDP (PPP) in Trillions USD	% of Global GDP	Population (Billion)
2020 (Original)	5	42	26	3.2
2024 (Post-Expansion)	10	60	36	4.1

G7 (Comparator)	7	52	30	0.78
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