

Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept: A Review of the International Scholarly Literature

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Abstract

This article provides a structured review of the international scholarly literature on the Russian Federation's new foreign policy concept adopted in 2023. Drawing on a systematic analysis of key academic works, the article classifies the literature into four major analytical approaches: (i) studies emphasizing continuity and long-term inheritance from post-Cold War multipolar thinking and the Primakov strategic legacy; (ii) approaches that interpret the new foreign policy as a strategic turning point and a rupture with the Euro-Atlantic order; (iii) analyses framing Russia as a central actor within the Global South and the emerging multipolar order; and (iv) studies adopting regional and functional perspectives, examining how the new foreign policy doctrine is implemented in practice. The review demonstrates that, while these approaches offer divergent interpretations, they converge in identifying a structural shift in Russia's foreign policy toward sustained confrontation with the West and strategic repositioning within a fragmented international order. The article argues that Russia's new foreign policy simultaneously reflects long-term continuity and elements of structural rupture. On this basis, it identifies key research gaps and proposes comparative and interdisciplinary directions for future research in contemporary international relations.

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Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy of the Russian Federation has undergone multiple phases of adjustment in response to a Western-led international order, particularly within the context of the emergence of a US-dominated unipolar system (Wohlforth, 1999). In the early post-Soviet period, Russia pursued selective integration with the West while simultaneously seeking to restore great-power status through the reconfiguration of national identity, interests, and strategic space (Clunan, 2009; Tsygankov, 2016; Zubok, 2021). Growing tensions with the West—especially following the 2014 Ukraine crisis—exposed the structural limits of this integration model and increasingly positioned Russia in opposition to the Euro-Atlantic order (Allison, 2017; Charap & Colton, 2016).

Within this context, many scholars have argued that Russian foreign policy reflects the long-term continuity of multipolar thinking and the legacy of the Primakov doctrine, emphasizing balance of power and resistance to Western hegemony (DeLong, 2020; Sakwa, 2017). However, the Russia-Ukraine conflict since 2022 has marked a significant turning point, as Russia shifted from a preventive balancing strategy to structural confrontation with the West and explicitly rejected the Western-promoted “rules-based international order” (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sakwa, 2021).

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The adoption of the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in 2023 clearly institutionalized this shift, as Russia redefined itself as an independent civilizational and political center, promoted multipolarity, and expanded engagement with the Global South—particularly through BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and Russia–China relations (President of the Russian Federation, 2023; Romanova, 2024; Simons et al., 2025). This strategic reorientation has attracted substantial scholarly attention, generating diverse analytical approaches ranging from historical continuity and strategic rupture to regional and functional analyses in areas such as security, international law, migration, and information policy (Baikushikova & Amrenova, 2019; Barannikov & Martynova, 2024; Skuratov, 2021).

Russia's foreign policy adjustment must therefore be situated within the broader post-Soviet historical context, shaped by profound transformations in state structure, international status, and a prolonged identity crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Zubok, 2021). Nevertheless, existing studies remain fragmented and lack a comprehensive review capable of systematically mapping the main analytical approaches and scholarly debates surrounding Russia's new foreign policy. This article seeks to address this gap by offering a structured and critical review of the current international academic literature.

Objectives and Methods

The objective of this article is to develop a structured and systematic overview of international scholarly approaches to the Russian Federation's new foreign policy, particularly following the adoption of the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in 2023. On this basis, the article pursues three specific aims: (i) to systematize and classify the main strands of research in the international literature, ranging from approaches emphasizing doctrinal continuity to interpretations framing the new foreign policy as a strategic turning point and rupture; (ii) to clarify areas of convergence and divergence in scholarly debates concerning Russia's role in the post-Western international order; and (iii) to identify existing research gaps related to the long-term implications of Russia's new foreign policy for global power structures and specific regional contexts (Sakwa, 2017; Tsygankov, 2016; Neimark, 2023).

Methodologically, the article employs a selective literature review, combined with qualitative content analysis, to examine the key arguments, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical assumptions advanced by different scholars. The corpus of literature consists of academic monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles published in English and Russian from the late Cold War period to the present, with particular emphasis on the post-2014 phase and especially the period following 2022. This selection strategy allows the analysis to situate Russia's new foreign policy within a long-term historical trajectory while also capturing policy adjustments driven by recent geopolitical shocks (Allison, 2013; Charap & Colton, 2016; Sakwa, 2021).

In addition, the study adopts a thematic classification approach, organized around key analytical axes such as foreign policy doctrine and national identity, multipolarity and the Global South, as well as regional and functional perspectives. This framework facilitates a systematic comparison of diverse scholarly interpretations and provides an analytical basis for assessing the degree of innovation and continuity in Russia's new foreign policy amid the ongoing reconfiguration of the international order (Clunan, 2009; Cooley & Nexon, 2020; Romanova, 2024).

Review Findings

Approaches Emphasizing Continuity and Inheritance

A prominent strand in the international scholarly literature argues that Russia's new foreign policy does not represent a fundamental rupture, but rather a systematic continuation of strategic thinking that has evolved since the post-Cold War period. From this perspective, the core principles of Russian foreign policy—multipolarity, balance of power, the protection of sovereignty, and resistance to Western hegemony—were already articulated in the late 1990s and have gradually been institutionalized through successive doctrinal documents, most notably those associated with the strategic legacy of Yevgeny Primakov (DeLong, 2020).

Many scholars emphasize that Russia's commitment to multipolarity should not be understood as a short-term response to recent geopolitical developments, but as the outcome of a long-term process of reconstructing national identity and strategic interests within a US-led unipolar international order (Clunan, 2009; Wohlforth, 1999). In the European context, Russia has frequently positioned itself as an actor that is simultaneously part of, yet excluded from, the Western political and normative order, generating a perception of being an “unrecognized outsider” within the Euro-Atlantic structure (Neumann, 2017). From this viewpoint, Russia has consistently sought to assert itself as a normatively autonomous great power with its own strategic space, even during periods of tactical cooperation with the West. Allison (2013) argues that Russia's selective engagement with international institutions and military intervention mechanisms did not imply full acceptance of a Western-defined order, but rather reflected an ongoing effort to reconcile integration with strategic autonomy.

Following the 2014 Ukraine crisis, subsequent studies have further reinforced the argument for continuity by examining how Russia interprets and applies international law. Allison (2017) contends that Russia does not reject international law as such, but instead promotes a realist and sovereignty-centered interpretation that challenges Western interventionist readings. This approach underscores the consistency between Russia's legal positions and its long-term foreign policy objectives, rather than indicating a sudden normative shift.

Research on foreign policy decision-making and institutional planning also supports the continuity thesis. Borshchevskiy (2021) demonstrates that efforts to optimize foreign policy planning mechanisms and the overseas operations of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reflect adjustments in instruments and organizational capacity rather than a fundamental reorientation of strategic goals. Similarly, Baikushikova and Amrenova (2019) show that Russia's policy toward Central Asia continues to rest on previously established conceptual foundations, particularly the maintenance of regional influence through a combination of soft and hard power competition.

At the ideational level, studies on Eurasianism and the concept of the “Russian World” further highlight the historical depth of Russian foreign policy thinking. Laruelle (2011, 2015) argues that these discourses provide the ideological foundations for Russia's self-representation as a distinct civilizational center, thereby legitimizing claims for a multipolar international order. These elements are reaffirmed in recent doctrinal texts, including the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation adopted in 2023 (President of the Russian Federation, 2023).

Overall, approaches emphasizing continuity and inheritance interpret Russia's new foreign policy as an intensification and systematization of pre-existing strategic orientations rather than as a strategic rupture. By foregrounding historical depth, national identity, and

power-political logic, this perspective offers a crucial analytical framework for understanding Russian foreign policy behavior amid the ongoing transformation of the international order.

Approaches Interpreting the New Foreign Policy as a Strategic Turning Point and Rupture

In contrast to approaches emphasizing continuity, a substantial body of scholarship interprets Russia's new foreign policy as a strategic turning point amounting to a rupture with the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic order. From this perspective, the Russia-Ukraine conflict since 2022 is not merely a short-term catalyst but has driven Russia to openly abandon a strategy of cautious balancing in favor of structural confrontation with the West, entailing a fundamental redefinition of foreign policy goals, referent objects, and normative orientations (Sakwa, 2021; Mearsheimer, 2014).

Many studies argue that while the post-2014 period exposed the limits of integration and co-management with the West, it was only after 2022 that Russia formally rejected the Western-promoted "rules-based international order." Charap and Colton (2016) contend that the Ukraine crisis shattered the foundations of strategic trust, propelling Russia-West relations into an irreversible spiral of escalation. Within this context, Russia's new foreign policy is interpreted as a deliberate choice to terminate its role as a "reluctant partner" within the Euro-Atlantic system.

From a doctrinal standpoint, Neimark (2023) characterizes the 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation as a "turning point," marking a shift from adaptive engagement to long-term confrontational thinking. According to this interpretation, the new doctrine no longer seeks recognition from the West but instead prioritizes the delineation of clear normative and political boundaries between Russia and so-called "unfriendly" states. This signals a rupture not only at the strategic level but also in foreign policy discourse and identity construction.

Several scholars situate this rupture within the broader disintegration of the post-Cold War order. Sakwa (2017, 2021) argues that Russia's new foreign policy reflects the perception that the existing international order is no longer capable of accommodating Russia as an equal actor. From this vantage point, Russia's turn toward confrontation is not aimed at dismantling the international system per se, but at restructuring it along multipolar lines—even at the cost of prolonged conflict with the West. This approach emphasizes the systemic, rather than episodic, character of the strategic rupture. The rupture should also be analyzed in relation to long-term adjustments in the strategies of the European Union and the United States toward Russia since the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Kosheliev, 2024).

At the legal and institutional level, Allison (2017) notes that after 2014—and especially after 2022—Russia ceased attempts to reconcile its interpretations of international law with those of the West, instead advancing countervailing legal arguments grounded in absolute sovereignty and opposition to intervention. This development reinforces the claim that Russia's new foreign policy represents a conscious departure from normative frameworks that had previously been shared, at least partially, during the post-Cold War period.

Finally, several studies underscore the role of identity and political psychology in this rupture. Casula (2025) argues that the war in Ukraine catalyzed a reconfiguration of post-Soviet identity, through which Russia increasingly defines itself in opposition to the West not only in terms of interests but also values and historical memory. This reconfiguration is clearly reflected in the discourse of the new foreign policy, which emphasizes Russia's historical role and distinctive mission within the international order.

Taken together, approaches interpreting Russia's new foreign policy as a turning point and rupture contend that the period 2022–2023 marks the definitive end of the post–Cold War phase in Russia–West relations. From this perspective, the new foreign policy constitutes not merely a tactical adjustment but a long-term strategic reorientation, placing Russia on a trajectory of structural confrontation with the Euro-Atlantic order and inaugurating a new phase of uncertainty in the international system.

Approaches Framing the “Global South” and the Multipolar Order

A prominent line of recent international scholarship approaches Russia's new foreign policy through the analytical lens of the Global South and the emerging multipolar order. From this perspective, Russia's post-2022 foreign policy is not merely a reaction to Western pressure but reflects a long-term strategy aimed at repositioning Russia as a center of power and normative authority within the non-Western world. In this literature, multipolarity is understood not simply as a redistribution of material power, but as a broader reconfiguration of the norms and discourses that structure international relations (Bobo, 2015; Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

Many studies argue that Russia's emphasis on the Global South in its new foreign policy signals a deliberate shift away from the Euro-Atlantic space toward alternative frameworks of cooperation, such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and expanded partnerships with Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Romanova (2024) contends that within the Global South framework, Russia seeks not only tactical support but also the construction of a political and normative community grounded in principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and opposition to unilateral sanctions. This approach enables Russia to align its interests with the long-standing structural grievances of many developing countries toward the Western-led international order.

Some scholars situate this reorientation within the broader context of declining US hegemony and the gradual “exit from hegemony” of the liberal international order. Cooley and Nexon (2020) argue that dissatisfied powers—including Russia—are exploiting institutional and normative gaps within the existing international system to promote alternative configurations of power. Within this logic, Russia's turn toward the Global South is not merely reactive, but forms part of a proactive strategy to construct a multipolar order in which authority and influence are more flexibly distributed among regional centers.

At the doctrinal and discursive level, Laruelle (2011, 2015) demonstrates that concepts such as Eurasianism and the “Russian World” provide an ideational foundation for Russia's self-representation as a civilizational center distinct from the West. These discourses have been reactivated in the post-2022 context and integrated into Russia's engagement with the Global South, emphasizing shared experiences of colonialism, developmental trajectories, and aspirations for strategic autonomy. Russia's new foreign policy thus seeks not only partners, but also normative affinity and identity-based resonance (Laruelle, 2015).

Recent studies have also focused on the Russia–China dimension within the Global South framework. Simons, Glaser, and Volosyuk (2025) argue that the Russia–China relationship constitutes a central pillar of Moscow's Global South-oriented strategy, combining economic and strategic complementarity with a critical foundation for challenging Western dominance. At the same time, these authors caution that asymmetries within the relationship impose constraints on Russia's leadership ambitions within the Global South. From this perspective, Russia's

promotion of multipolarity and expanded engagement with the Global South can be understood as a response to hierarchical inequalities embedded in the contemporary international order, reflecting the systemic grievances of non-Western powers (Zarakol, 2017).

Finally, some studies approach Russia's new foreign policy through specific regional contexts within the Global South. Garin (2023) shows that Russia's expansion of diplomatic discourse and external presence into regions such as the Pacific and small island states reflects an effort to universalize its new foreign policy doctrine beyond traditional spheres of influence. This reinforces the argument that the Global South represents not merely a tactical direction, but a structural pillar of Russia's post-2022 foreign policy thinking.

Taken together, approaches grounded in the Global South and multipolarity emphasize that Russia's new foreign policy should be understood as a systemic repositioning strategy, aimed at constructing alternative spaces of cooperation and non-Western normative frameworks. This perspective provides an important complement to approaches focused on continuity or rupture by highlighting the order-building and discursive dimensions of contemporary Russian foreign policy.

Regional and Functional Approaches

Alongside doctrinal and international-order-focused perspectives, another important strand of scholarship approaches Russia's new foreign policy from regional and functional angles. This approach argues that the meaning and degree of innovation in Russia's foreign policy can only be fully understood when examined within specific geopolitical contexts and policy domains, where strategic objectives are translated into concrete practices (Baikushikova & Amrenova, 2019; Borshchevskiy, 2021).

At the regional level, a substantial body of research focuses on the post-Soviet space and Central Asia as a laboratory for the operationalisation of new foreign policy concepts. Baikushikova and Amrenova (2019) show that Russia's policy toward Central Asia reflects continuity with established conceptual foundations—maintaining influence, ensuring security, and controlling strategic space—while simultaneously incorporating new elements such as soft competition with China and adaptation to a multipolar environment. Similarly, Osmonov (2022) demonstrates that updated foreign policy doctrines have provided a more flexible policy framework for Russia–Kyrgyzstan relations, enabling Russia to recalibrate its instruments of influence amid resource constraints and intensified competition.

Beyond the post-Soviet region, some studies extend the analysis to more distant areas, including East Asia and the Pacific. Garin (2023) argues that Russia's inclusion of the Pacific and small island states in its new foreign policy discourse reflects an ambition to universalise its foreign policy doctrine, thereby underscoring the global scope of its Global South-oriented and multipolar strategy. This regional perspective suggests that Russia's new foreign policy is not confined to traditional spheres of influence, but also seeks to expand symbolic and political presence in regions that were previously of lower priority.

Parallel to regional analyses, a growing number of studies focus on specific functional domains to assess the content and instruments of Russia's new foreign policy. In the field of information security, Barannikov and Martynova (2024) argue that safeguarding information security has been closely integrated into the implementation of Russia's foreign policy doctrine, reflecting Moscow's perception of information as a strategic domain of competition on par with

military and economic spheres. This indicates that Russia's new foreign policy extends into non-traditional domains, consistent with an environment of comprehensive power competition.

In the realm of international law, Skuratov (2021) emphasises that Russia is promoting a Eurasian legal framework grounded in principles of sovereignty and sovereign equality, thereby challenging Western interventionist interpretations. This functional approach complements doctrinal analyses by clarifying how Russia translates foreign policy principles into concrete legal arguments and practices.

Other studies expand the analysis to migration policy and state governance, viewing these areas as points of intersection between domestic and foreign policy. Yurchenko (2024) shows that Russia's migration policy is closely linked to security and legal priorities, illustrating how the new foreign policy permeates domestic governance domains. Gadzhieva (2024), through an assessment of comprehensive works on the history and contemporary state of Russian foreign policy, similarly underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches for fully understanding contemporary Russian foreign policy.

Taken together, regional and functional approaches demonstrate that Russia's new foreign policy does not constitute a single, abstract blueprint, but rather a diverse set of practices flexibly adapted to specific spaces and policy domains. This perspective provides an important complement to doctrinal and international-order analyses, while also clarifying the scope and limits of innovation in Russian foreign policy as it moves from strategic formulation to practical implementation.

Discussion and Research Gaps

Synthesising the approaches reviewed in the findings section reveals that the international literature on Russia's new foreign policy has produced a multifaceted picture, yet significant divergences remain in how scholars interpret the nature and implications of Russia's post-2022 strategic adjustment. On the one hand, studies emphasising continuity and inheritance portray Russia's new foreign policy as a systematic intensification of long-standing orientations, particularly multipolar doctrine and the Primakov strategic legacy (DeLong, 2020; Sakwa, 2017; Tsygankov, 2016). On the other hand, approaches framing the policy as a turning point and rupture argue that Russia has abandoned the logic of integration and balancing in favour of structural confrontation with the Euro-Atlantic order, marking a definitive end to the post-Cold War phase (Neimark, 2023; Sakwa, 2021).

This divergence reflects a core scholarly debate: whether Russia's new foreign policy should be understood as a change in degree or a change in kind. However, much of the existing literature tends to align exclusively with one of these positions, while relatively few studies attempt to reconcile or analyse the dialectical relationship between continuity and rupture. This limitation creates a gap in explaining how historical legacies, identity construction, and power structures interact with short-term geopolitical shocks to shape Russian foreign policy behaviour (Clunan, 2009; Allison, 2017).

In addition, approaches grounded in the Global South and multipolarity have substantially enriched understandings of Russia's new foreign policy, particularly by highlighting its norm-building and non-Western discursive dimensions (Romanova, 2024; Simons et al., 2025). Nevertheless, a common limitation of this body of research is its strong focus on discourse and policy declarations, coupled with a relative lack of comparative analysis regarding how Global South states actually receive, endorse, or contest the leadership role that

Russia seeks to assume. This gap raises questions about the distance between Russia's strategic ambitions and its material and political capacity to construct a multipolar order in practice (Bobo, 2015; Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

At the regional and functional levels, the literature provides detailed analyses of how Russia's new foreign policy is implemented across specific spaces and domains, including Central Asia, the Pacific, information security, international law, and migration (Baikushikova & Amrenova, 2019; Barannikov & Martynova, 2024; Skuratov, 2021). However, these studies are predominantly descriptive or based on single-case analyses, and they lack cross-regional and cross-sectoral comparative frameworks. As a result, the internal coherence of Russia's new foreign policy across different contexts remains insufficiently examined, as do potential tensions between strategic objectives and implementation outcomes.

Another notable gap concerns the limited number of studies examining Russia's new foreign policy from the perspectives of middle and small powers, particularly in Asia and Southeast Asia. Much of the existing literature analyses Russia primarily in relation to the West or China, while paying comparatively little attention to how actors outside these poles interpret and respond to Russia's strategic repositioning (Baikushikova & Amrenova, 2019; Osmonov, 2022). This omission constrains the ability to assess the broader systemic impact of Russia's new foreign policy on regional and global power configurations.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the primary research gaps lie in the absence of comparative, interdisciplinary, and multi-level studies that bridge doctrine, discourse, and practical implementation. Addressing these gaps would not only deepen understanding of the nature and consequences of Russia's new foreign policy but also contribute more broadly to scholarship on international order under conditions of fragmentation and transition.

Conclusion

This article has provided a structured and systematic review of international scholarly approaches to the Russian Federation's new foreign policy in the post-2022 context, with particular emphasis on the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation adopted in 2023. By classifying the literature into four main analytical approaches—those emphasising continuity and inheritance, those interpreting the policy as a strategic turning point and rupture, approaches grounded in the Global South and multipolar order, and regional and functional perspectives—the article has clarified the multidimensional landscape of debates and points of convergence within international scholarship on this topic.

The review demonstrates that Russia's new foreign policy cannot be explained through a single analytical lens. Studies emphasising continuity highlight the historical depth, identity foundations, and power-political logic shaping Russian foreign policy thinking, while approaches framing the policy as a turning point underscore the extent of strategic rupture in Russia–West relations after 2022. At the same time, the Global South and multipolarity framework expands understanding of the new foreign policy as a norm-constructing repositioning strategy that goes beyond reactive confrontation. Regional and functional analyses, although fragmented, provide empirical insights into how the new foreign policy doctrine is flexibly implemented across specific geopolitical contexts and policy domains.

On this basis, the article argues that Russia's new foreign policy simultaneously embodies elements of long-term continuity and structural rupture, reflecting the complex interaction

between enduring power structures and short-term geopolitical shocks. The primary research gaps identified lie in the lack of comparative, interdisciplinary, and multi-level studies, as well as the limited inclusion of perspectives from middle and small powers. Further research along these lines would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the long-term implications of Russia's new foreign policy for the reconfiguration of the international order.

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