

# Russia's View of the Multipolar World: A Hegemonic Vision of Power and Hierarchy

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## Abstract

The article examines how Russia employs the concept of a multipolar world to justify a hierarchical and hegemonic vision of international order. Drawing on structural realist theory, it argues that Moscow's rhetoric of multipolarity masks a project aimed at restoring great power status, securing regional dominance, and weakening Western liberal norms. Using discourse analysis and process tracing, the study reviews Russian foreign policy concepts, security strategies, and speeches by key elites, alongside case studies of institutional participation in SCO, CSTO, EAEU, and BRICS and military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and Kazakhstan. The analysis shows that Russia institutionalises multipolarity politically through alternative regional and global platforms that reinforce its centrality, operationalises it strategically through coercive use of force and veto power, and justifies it normatively through sovereigntist and civilisational narratives. Three intertwined ideological pillars balance of power, sovereignty as civilisational defence, and civilisational pluralism provide moral cover for revisionist policies at home and abroad. The article concludes that Russia's version of multipolarity is not an inclusive pluralist alternative to the liberal international order, but a fragmented system organised around spheres of influence, hierarchy, and the unconstrained autonomy of great powers.

## Introduction

Russia's vision of a multipolar world order has become the central driving force of its post-Cold War foreign policy discourse. This concept has served as both a critique of Western unipolar dominance and as means for justifying Russia's geopolitical ambitions. Official documents, speeches, and strategic documents consistently portray multipolarity as a corrective to Western

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unipolar hegemony and a framework for restoring international balance. Yet beneath its normative rhetoric, Moscow's interpretation of multipolarity aligns with the structural realist conception on international politics – a struggle among great powers to secure relative power, regional dominance, and autonomy within an anarchic system.

Structural realism – most prominently developed by Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer – views the distribution of capabilities among states as the primary determinant of state behaviour (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014). From this perspective, Russia's actions since the 1990s, including its institutional innovations (SCO, CSTO, BRICS) and coercive interventions (Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014, and 2022), reflect a systemic drive to re-establish balance in a world long dominated by the United States (Lo, 2015; Aris, 2011; Stuenkel, 2015; Allison, 2016; Trenin, 2011). The multipolar rhetoric serves as both an ideological justification and a strategic roadmap for this balancing project. Relying on structural realist theory, the paper argues that Russia's imagination of a multipolar world is less about fostering genuine pluralism in the international system (as it claims) and more about reasserting sovereign dominance, while balancing Western powers and institutionalising its status as an independent pole in a reconfigured world order.

The idea of multipolarity holds a special place in the Kremlin's grand strategy. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Russian political elites have repeatedly invoked the notion of multipolarity as an effective antidote to the American-led unipolarity (Lo, 2015, pp. 23–25). One of the earliest and most influential proponents of this vision was Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who in the mid-1990s articulated the so-called Primakov Doctrine, envisioning a multipolar world order grounded in the strategic balancing of power among major centres such as Russia, China, India and the US (Tsygankov, 2023, pp. 87–90). Primakov argued that the post-Cold War should not be dominated by a single superpower and actively promoted the “strategic triangle” of Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi to counterbalance US global influence (Mankoff, 2012, pp. 61–64; Primakov, 2004, pp. 119–122). For Moscow, the concept of multipolarity involves not only the distribution of power among great powers, but a reassertion of sovereignty against Western ideological, economic, and geopolitical hegemony.

The paper employs qualitative research design that combines discourse analysis, policy examination, and comparative evolution to explore the political, strategic, and normative dimensions of Russia's concept of

multipolarity. The study analyses key official statements, and strategic documents, including Russia's foreign policy concepts and national security strategies, providing insight into how the Kremlin has codified multipolarity from a rhetorical tool into a central tenet of state doctrine. In parallel, speeches by Russian senior officials – most notably Yevgeny Primakov's advocacy of a "strategic triangle" among Russia, China and India in the 1990s, Putin's 2007 Munich speech, and Sergey Lavrov's more recent addresses at the Valdai Discussion Club – are analysed to trace the conceptual and ideological evolution of the term within elite political discourse (Primakov, 1998; O'Donnell and Papa, 2021; Putin, 2007; Sakwa, 2023).

To connect rhetoric with action, the paper adopts a process training approach that examines how shifts in Russia's discourse on multipolarity have coincided with major geopolitical events and policy decisions. Case studies, including Russia's participation in BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as well as its military interventions in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Syria (2015), and Ukraine (2022) serve to show how Moscow operationalises multipolarity as a strategic framework (Ferragamo, 2025; Bailes et al., 2007; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017). These actions are assessed not only as manifestations of geopolitical ambition but also as mechanisms through which Russia seeks to institutionalise its vision of a post-Western world (Chatham House, 2008; Charap et al., 2021).

Finally, the study employs a comparative analytical frame that situates Russia's interpretation of multipolarity between two different reference points: the Western international liberal order and rising powers pluralist narratives. This comparative dimension allows for the identification of both convergence and divergence in how these actors understand sovereignty, hierarchy, and global governance. The analysis proceeds with three interrelated dimensions – political, strategic, and normative. Politically the study considers institutional participation and alliance patterns; strategically it assesses Russia's military behaviour and power projection; and normatively, it examines ideological and civilisational narratives. Together these components form a coherent rhetoric into an operational strategy guiding Russian foreign policy in greater Eurasia and beyond.

### **The Political Dimension: Institutionalising Multipolarity**

The political dimension concerns Russia's efforts to institutionalise multipolarity through the creation and consolidation of regional and global platforms that dilute Western dominance (Stronski and Sokolsky, 2020). This involves alternative centres of coordination both in Eurasia and the broader Global South, which are intended to rebalance the global power structure (Volkov and Shangaraev, 2025; Bastanifar, Khan, and Koch, 2024). Initiatives such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) exemplify Moscow's attempt to embed multipolarity into the architecture of international relations (Bailes et al., 2007; Aris, 2008). These platforms serve dual purposes: they enhance Russia's diplomatic leverage and symbolise a counter-model to Western-led institutions such as NATO and the European Union (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017). By promoting collective sovereignty and regional autonomy, the Kremlin advances multipolarity not merely as an abstract concept but a functional mechanism for legitimising Russia's status as a central pole with an evolving international order.

### **The Strategic Dimension: Operationalising Multipolarity**

The strategic dimension captures how Russia operationalises multipolarity through its military and security behaviour (Cohen, 2009, pp. 214–238; Charap and Colton, 2017). Here, the focus shifts from institutional diplomacy to the projection of power and the redefinition of security hierarchies (Charap et al., 2021). Russia's military actions in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Syria (2015,) and Ukraine (2022) demonstrate willingness to employ coercive means to resist to what it perceives as Western encroachment and assert regional primacy (Chatham House, 2008). Yet they also signal an ambition to reshape geopolitical realities by force (Merezhko, 2015). These interventions are framed by Moscow as defensive measures in a contested international environment (Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019). Moreover, Russia's pursuit of strategic partnerships with China and Iran, its investments in energy geopolitics, and its emphasis on deterrence and sovereignty reflect a broader commitment to constructing a polycentric world where no single power can dictate global outcomes.

## **The Normative Dimension: Justifying Multipolarity**

The normative dimension addresses the ideational and moral claims underpinning Russia's multipolar vision (Atamali, 2021). Rooted in a critique of the Western liberal universalism, Russian policy makers and thinkers portray multipolarity as a just and natural order that acknowledges the world's cultural, civilisational and political diversity (Dugin, 2024). The foreign policy concepts of 2021 and 2023 explicitly link multipolarity to the protection of civilisational identity, and sovereign equality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). Russian theorists such as Alexander Dugin and Vladislav Surkin have advanced the notion of civilisational pluralism, arguing that each major power embodies its own civilisational model of governance and values (Dugin, 2022; Lapaeva, 2024). With this framework, Moscow positions itself as a defender of traditional state sovereignty and moral order against perceived Western ideological homogenisation (Kortunov, 2019; Drobinin, 2023). Thus, the normative dimension gives Russia's pursuit of multipolarity its moral and philosophical coherence, transforming it from a mere *realpolitik* into an alternative vision of global governance.

These dimensions provide an analytical lens for examining the evolution and implementation of Russia's multipolar world vision.

## **Historical Evolution of the Concept: Post-Soviet Beginnings-1990s**

In the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia briefly attempted to integrate into Western institutions (Trenin, 2016). After realising that joining Western institutions on its own terms was unattainable, Russia gradually abandoned its early post-Soviet ambition of integration with the Euro-Atlantic community (Nepogodin, 2022). In the 1990s, under Boris Yeltsin, Moscow expressed a genuine desire to become part of the Western-led international order, seeking participation in organisations such as the EU, NATO, and G7 (German, 2017). Russian officials frequently invoked the concept of a "common European home", a concept inherited from Mikhail Gorbachov's late Soviet diplomacy, to signal Russia's willingness to cooperate with Western powers on shared security and economic frameworks (Foxall, 2018). Yet Moscow's conception of integration was predicated on a specific role in its immediate neighbourhood: recognition of Russia's special role in the post-Soviet space, acknowledgment of its special interests in Europe, and

consultative status in Euro-Atlantic decision-making (European Parliament, 1998).

These expectations – essentially partnership on Russia’s terms – conflicted with Western vision of enlargement and governance (Zagorski, 2019, pp. 35–58). The United States and the EU insisted that accession to Western institutions required adherence to liberal-democratic norms, market reforms, and respect for sovereignty of the states of Central and Eastern Europe (Lucas, 2008). From Moscow’s perspective, such conditions undermined its regional influence and disregarded its security interests. The divergence became evident in the 1990s and early 2000s, when NATO enlarged to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999, followed by the Baltic states in 2004 (Stent, 2014, pp. 42–63). Western interventions in the Balkans, particularly NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia without UN authorisation, further convinced Russian elites that their terms of partnership had been denied and that Russia’s interests were being systematically marginalised (Latawski and Smith, 2003). Disillusioned with the West, Moscow recalibrated its strategy to challenge the West. In its efforts to preserve its exclusive sphere of influence, Moscow deliberately encouraged and supported separatist movements across the region, using conflicts in places like Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria as instruments of leverage to maintain control over neighbouring states.

### **Putin’s Consolidation (2000-present)**

Under Vladimir Putin, the idea of multipolarity has evolved from a theoretical proposition into a structural principle of Russian grand strategy (Antonova and Lagutina, 2023, p. 21). Since the 2000s Russian foreign policy concepts, national security strategies, and military doctrines have consistently emphasised multipolarity as both a “natural” and inevitable outcome of global evolution (Sushentsov, 2025, p. 12). For instance, the 2000 Foreign Policy Concept introduced the term as a corrective to what Moscow called the “unacceptable monopoly” of the United States in world affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000). Subsequent versions reinforced the notion that the polycentric world order should replace the Western centric model that had dominated since the end of the Cold War (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2000; 2008; 2013). This institutional repetition shows how multipolarity was not merely

rhetorical but systematically codified into Russia's state ideology (Barbashin and Graef, 2019).

Putin's 2007 Munich security conference speech remains a seminal public articulation of this worldview. Speaking before Western leaders, Putin challenged the unipolar world order, asserting that one state and one centre of power had imposed its will on others, undermining international law and sovereignty (Putin, 2007; Carpenter, 2022). He denounced NATO expansion, criticised the US intervention in the Middle East, and called for a new balance in the global politics based on sovereign equality (Rahim, 2018). The Munich address, therefore, represented not only a critique of US hegemony, but also the formal announcement of Russia's intention to reclaim its distinct geopolitical pole: an autonomous civilisational centre grounded in Eurasian identity and a historic mission (Krasilnikov, 2022). In essence, it transformed multipolarity from defensive argument into ideological manifesto. Russia would no longer integrate with the West on Western terms but would instead compete with it as a separate centre.

Fifteen years later, Putin's 2022 "security guarantees" ultimatum to NATO and the United States crystallised the practical consequences of this worldview (Mackinnon, 2022). The demands including a rollback of NATO infrastructure to pre-1997 borders and the exclusion of Ukraine and Georgia from membership, echoing the same themes raised in Munich – resentment towards Western expansion, defence of Russia's security sphere, and the assertion of "civilisational right" to regional dominance (Szymański, 2022). However, the method and tone had changed dramatically. Whereas the 2007 speech sought recognition through dialogue, the 2022 ultimatum embodied coercive diplomacy backed by military force (AALEP, 2022). The conceptual overlap lies in the continuity of grievance and goal – resisting Western unipolarity – but the divergence lies in means and confidence (Mills, 2022): Russia had moved from rhetorical protest to overt militarisation of multipolarity.

Thus, the trajectory from Munich to Moscow 2022 marks Russia's evolution from rhetorical challenger to revisionist actor. Multipolarity once framed as a call for sovereign equality now justifies the subversion of that principle in practice, especially towards neighbouring states such as Georgia and Ukraine. In both documents, Putin portrayed Russia as a defender of balance and civilisation against Western encroachment. But by 2022 that defence transformed into an imperial assertion of hierarchy within the post-Soviet space. The language of equality persisted, its application not.

## Institutional Pillars of Russian Strategy

By the early 2000s, this disillusionment catalysed a strategic reorientation in Moscow's foreign policy. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia abandoned the notion of integration with the West and began constructing an alternative geopolitical identity rooted in sovereignty and regional leadership. The creation of the Eurasian Union, closer coordination with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and revival of security mechanisms under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation reflected an effort to build a counterweight to the Western order. In that sense, Russia's shift from attempted inclusion to deliberate exclusion was less a rejection of globalisation than an assertion of autonomy and recalibration of strategy from integration toward the pursuit of multipolarity on its own terms.

*The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)* represents one of the earliest and most durable attempts to embed multipolarity into regional security architecture. Established in 2001 and comprising Russia, China and four central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), the SCO was designed as a platform for managing security threats, especially terrorism, separatism, and extremism, without Western involvement. Over time the SCO evolved into a forum for strategic dialogue and limited economic coordination, later admitting India and Pakistan, and granting observer status to Iran (now a full member). For Russia, the SCO serves as both a symbolic and practical counterweight to NATO's presence in Eurasia. It legitimises the Russian narrative that regional powers can independently provide for their security and resist what it calls the "unipolar order". Yet the SCO's effectiveness is constrained by the competing ambitions of China and Russia; Beijing prioritises economic connectivity through its Belt and Road Initiative while Moscow emphasises the security dimension. Nevertheless, the SCO embodies the multilateral façade of Russia's multipolar vision as an institutional manifestation of Eurasian sovereignty distinct from a Western-led alliance.

*The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)*, by contrast, functions as Russia's military instrument of multipolarity within the post-Soviet space. Formed in 1992, from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) security arrangements and institutionalised in 2002, the CSTO includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. It is modelled rhetorically as a Eurasian counterpart to NATO, aimed at guaranteeing collective defence against external threats. In practice

however, it reinforces Russian primacy. Moscow provides the command structure, hosts the organisation's headquarters, and dominates its rapid reaction forces.

The CSTO has been used selectively to project Russia's leadership, most visibly in the January 2022 intervention in Kazakhstan, where CSTO troops helped stabilise the Tokayev government amid internal unrest (von Essen and Hedenskog, 2022). That deployment demonstrated Russia's capacity to use multilateral frameworks to legitimise its military presence, strengthening its claim as the guarantor of order in Eurasia (Cornell, 2022; Kucera, 2022). While member states often view the CSTO instrumentally – seeking Russian security guarantees without ceding full autonomy – it nonetheless provides Moscow with an institutional mechanism to organise its sphere of influence under the name of collective security defence. In stark contrast to NATO, the CSTO's goal is not to deter a specific threat or protect its members, but rather to subordinate other members, to serve Russia's interests, which, in turn, illustrates the logic of Russian multipolarity.

*The BRICS grouping* (Brazil, India, China, and South Africa) functions as the global economic counterpart of Russia's multipolar strategy (Merke, 2021). Since its formation in the late 2000s BRICS has sought to challenge Western dominance in global economic governance by promoting alternatives to Bretton Woods Institutions (IMF and the World Bank), including the New Development Bank (NDB), and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), (New Development Bank, n.d.; Nogueira Batista Jr., 2020). Russia's participation in BRICS serves both strategic and ideological purposes: it projects Russia as part of an emerging coalition of non-Western power capable of shaping global financial norms, and it reinforces Putin's claim that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be defined by civilisational pluralism rather than liberal universalism (Snegovaya, 2021). Moscow has consistently framed BRICS as proof that the world is moving toward a polycentric economic system where Western sanctions, financial instruments, and value systems no longer dictate the global agenda. Despite persistent asymmetries, particularly China's economic dominance, BRICS provides Russia with an indispensable diplomatic platform to demonstrate its continued relevance in global governance despite isolation from Western institutions.

Together these institutions – the SCO, CSTO, and BRICS – constitute the institutional triad of Russia's multipolar project. Each serves distinct function: the SCO offers a regional security dialogue, balancing China's rise; the CSTO enforces Russia's strategic depth within the post-Soviet

space; and BRICS projects global legitimacy by aligning Russia with rising non-Western economies. Thus, multipolarity organised through these institutions provides justification for Russia's regional primacy under the veneer of cooperative sovereignty.

### **Multipolarity in Practice**

While frameworks initiated by Russia officially promote political, economic, and security cooperation with regional actors, in practice, they are designed to reassert Russia's dominance over its neighbours under the banner of regional integration.

Nowhere is Russia's interpretation of multipolarity more visible than in its use of military power across the post-Soviet space. Russia's interventions, from the 2008 war against Georgia, and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, represent more than territorial or security calculations. They are deliberate manifestations of a worldview that seeks to challenge what Russia perceives to be an unjust Western-dominated order (Allison, 2008). In the Kremlin's discourse, each of these conflicts has been reframed as a struggle to preserve sovereignty and civilisational identity against the encroachment of Western liberalism. The war in Ukraine, in particular, is not an aggressive, but a defensive, operation to resist Western expansionism and restore a balance of power reflective of multiple civilisational centres.

In this context, the Kremlin has elevated the concept of multipolarity from the structural idea to a moral crusade, fusing it with the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and civilisational pluralism. Russian officials increasingly frame multipolarity as a process of global decolonisation, where non-Western powers reclaim their rightful agency in international affairs after centuries of Western political, economic and cultural domination (Laruelle, 2023). By invoking this analogy, Russia attempts to rebrand itself as a leader of the "Global South," a term that has gained prominence in Russian and Chinese vocabularies (Gabuev, 2016). The "global majority" (Bondarev, 2024) refers broadly to the collective of non-Western states spanning Africa, Asia, Latin America, and parts of the Middle East, which together represent most of the world's population but have historically been underrepresented in decision-making within global institutions like the UN Security Council, IMF, and World Bank (Tsygankov and Muhwezi, 2025; Silaev, 2024).

For Moscow, the global majority narrative serves multiple purposes. It allows Moscow to cast its confrontation with the West as a universal struggle for equality in the international system, rather than an isolated geopolitical struggle. It also appeals to postcolonial sensibilities in the Global South, where states harbour long-standing grievances over Western interventionism, and perceived double-standards. By positioning itself as the voice of this majority, Russia seeks to build new coalitions beyond the Euro-Atlantic sphere through arms sales, energy partnerships, and diplomatic forums such as BRICS and the Russia-Africa summits.

However, this rhetoric also obscures contradictions in Russia's own behaviour. While claiming to champion decolonisation, Moscow simultaneously pursues neo-imperial ambitions in its immediate neighbourhood, using coercion and occupation to assert control over former Soviet republics. Yet for many regimes in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America – often ruled by illiberal regimes or authoritarian elites – Russia's narrative of resistance to Western dominance resonates deeply. It offers ideological cover for their own domestic repression and a sense of solidarity against what they perceive as Western political and cultural intrusion. In this sense, the global majority is less a coherent geopolitical bloc than a discursive construct, one that Russia skilfully employs to legitimise its revisionist agenda and transform multipolarity into a rallying cry for a world no longer governed by Western norms.

### **Ideology Behind Strategy**

It could be argued that for the Kremlin, the multipolar worldview is not only strategic, but moral. As a consequence, the Russian multipolarity concept is deeply ideological, relying on different, but intertwined ideological currents: balance of power, sovereigntism, and civilisational pluralism, each intending to challenge the moral foundations and institutional frameworks of the Western-led international order.

According to Russian multipolarity, international peace and order are not achieved through international law and international frameworks, but through a balance of power among competing centres of influence. This worldview fundamentally rejects the liberal assumption that democracy, institutions, and economic interdependence inherently foster stability. Instead, Moscow regards the international system as an arena of constant

competition, where equilibrium, not law, preserves order. Within this logic, Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 was framed as an act of strategic restoration. Following the America-led regime change operations in the Middle East, the Kremlin presented its defence of Bashar al-Assad's government as a necessary move to restore balance in the region and uphold the principle of state sovereignty against Western interference. The operation elevated Russia to the status of a decisive power broker in the Middle East, capable of shaping outcomes independent of Western influence while symbolically demonstrating its capacity to challenge the US hegemony beyond its traditional sphere of influence.

The same rationale underpins Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 which Moscow portrays not as an act of aggression but as a pre-emptive defence against what it calls the Western-centric order. The Kremlin insists that the war is part of broader resistance to America's unipolar dominance, positioning itself as a defender of global equilibrium and a guarantor of alternative centres of power. Through this narrative, Russia seeks to legitimise its revisionist behaviour as a necessary corrective to Western overreach, rather than as a violation of international norms.

Simultaneously, Russia's approach to global institutions such as the UN and OSCE reflect its strategy of obstructing and reshaping the very mechanisms designed to uphold the rule-based international order. As the permanent member of the Security Council, Russia frequently wields its veto power to block resolutions condemning its actions or those of its allies, most notably in Syria and Ukraine, and to paralyse collective responses to crisis that challenge its geopolitical interests (Banting and Malone, 2019). This consistent use of veto serves both as defensive tool and as a statement of defiance, reinforcing Moscow's claim that the existing international system is biased toward Western dominance (Olech and Waszczykowski, 2025). In the OSCE, Russia employs procedural obstruction and political manipulation to undermine initiatives aimed at strengthening domestic governance, conflict monitoring, and human rights protections within the post-Soviet space (*Ibid.*). By exploiting its membership and veto prerogatives, Moscow effectively neutralises these institutions' capacity to act as neutral arbiters or enforcers of norms.

In essence, Russia's use of institutional veto power complements its broader multipolar agenda. It transforms mechanisms of collective governance into instruments of strategic paralysis, demonstrating that no global action is legitimate without Moscow's consent. Through both coercive and

procedural obstruction, Russia operationalises its vision of a multipolar world as one where great powers act as autonomous poles, immune to external constraints, and where balance, rather than law, defines the architecture of international peace.

Russia's conception of a multipolar world also draws upon sovereignty as its central ideological pillar. In the Kremlin's view, sovereignty is not merely a legal principle, but a civilisational shield against liberal universalism, Western influence and cultural expansionism. Moscow's emphasis on "sovereign democracy", a term coined by former Kremlin strategist Vladislav Surkov, encapsulates this idea – asserting that each state has the right to determine its political system and values free from external pressure (Surkov, 2006). This doctrine rejects the liberal notion of universal norms in favour of pluralism rooted in distinct historical and cultural traditions (Tsygankov, 2019a). In this struggle, the Kremlin portrays itself as the defender of traditional European values: Christianity, family, and national identity, against what it characterises as the moral relativism and neo-imperialism of the West (Laruelle, 2018).

This narrative has been repeatedly articulated by Vladimir Putin, especially in his speeches at the Valdai Discussion Club and in his 2013 address on "spiritual sovereignty" (Putin, 2013). In these addresses, Putin accused Western societies of abandoning their own cultural roots and promoting a global "cancel culture" that undermines the moral foundations of civilisation (Putin, 2022). He presents Russia as a bastion of continuity, arguing that it alone safeguards the true Europe – a Europe faithful to its Christian heritage and respect for sovereignty. This idea echoes the writings of Russian conservative thinkers such as Alexander Dugin, whose 'fourth Political Theory rejects both liberalism and Western universalism, calling instead for a return to civilisational plurality and protection of traditional values' (Dugin, 2012).

The Kremlin's ideological framing of sovereignty also extends to foreign policy. For instance, Russia's intervention in Syria was justified as the defence of Syrian statehood against Western-engineered regime change, while its war in Ukraine is portrayed as a mission to protect the sovereignty of the Russian world – *Russkiy Mir* – against Western encroachment. Moscow uses this rhetoric to rally support among conservative movements in Europe and the Global South, presenting itself as the vanguard of a multipolar world that respects cultural and political diversity. In practice, however, this defence of sovereignty often masks Russia's own neo-imperial ambitions,

as seen in its coercive policies toward neighbouring states and attempts to redefine sovereignty as a privilege reserved for great powers.

In its foreign policy concepts, Moscow frames its concepts as defending the right of all states to choose their own development path, a direct challenge to what it perceives as Western efforts to impose its political and economic models on others. For instance, Russia has sought to transform Western sanctions and isolation into symbols of emancipation and moral resistance, redefining sovereignty as a tool and revolutionary idea opposed to Western dependency (Tsygankov, 2019b). As Putin declared, Russia is breaking free from what he called “Western economic slavery” (Putin, 2022).

The third and most defining pillar of Russia ideological framework, inspired by thinkers such as Alexander Dugin, is civilisational pluralism, dividing the world into distinct civilisations each with its own value systems, historical destinies, and moral codes (Dugin, 2012). Civilisational pluralism defines international politics as relations among civilisations rather than nation-states, replacing Western-backed universal rights with cultural relativism. For Moscow, it legitimises hierarchy and dominance, because a civilisation must be led by a “core state”, positioning Russia as the guardian of the Eurasian world (Bordachev, 2021).

In his Valdai Club speeches, President Vladimir Putin often contrasts Western decadence with Russia’s moral clarity, portraying liberal democracy as an alien ideology that undermines traditional family values, faith, and patriotism (Putin, 2023) – the very values Russia claims to protect not only itself but also for the world (Laruelle, 2014).

In its outreach to the Global South, Moscow invokes anti-colonial solidarity and civilisational dignity as moral foundations of a multipolar world order. The 2023 Russia-Africa summit was wrapped in the language of liberation, portraying Russia as a partner in defending indigenous civilisations from the Western colonialism narrative designed to challenge Western posture in Africa while expanding Russia’s geopolitical influence across the continent. In consequence, civilisational pluralism serves as both a narrative tool and a strategic lever, tapping into non-Western resentment towards the West while masking Russia’s own imperial ambitions.

## Conclusion

Together, these ideas – balance of power, sovereignty, and civilisational pluralism – form the ideological core of Russia's multipolar world vision. They furnish a moral narrative to geopolitical ambition, reframing state interests as part of a broader struggle against Western dominance. In challenging what Russia perceives as Western dominance, it seeks to undermine the universality of Western norms, erode liberal internationalism, and promote a fragmented international order grounded in spheres of influence while contributing to the ideological consolidation of authoritarian regimes. Consequently, Russia's multipolar vision should not be seen as an alternative to the Western-led liberal order as it is rather a hegemonic vision that still centres on power, control, and hierarchy. While officially showing its desire for global fairness, Russia only delivers the old geopolitics in new clothes.

In a sense, Russia's vision of a multipolar world is a carefully-crafted blueprint for advancing its interests. While it claims to be a defensive reaction to growing Western encirclement, it is a proactive strategy for reestablishing Russian global influence. Moreover, although Moscow officially calls for equality among nation-states, in practice it employs multipolarity as a vehicle for restoring great-power politics. In conclusion, Russia's multipolarity is a fragmented order, which legitimises a narrative of power distribution among competing powerhouses, and is an effective tool in Moscow's toolkit to redefine the post-Cold War system on its own terms.

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