



Stanford University

**Russia's Narratives, BRICS Strategies, and Economic
Engagement with the Global South**

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Abstract: As the global order becomes increasingly multipolar, Russia is not only reacting to Western sanctions but also advancing a distinct vision of global governance. This study investigates the ideological, political, and economic narratives Russia uses to shape an 'alternative world order' in the Global South and examines how these narratives contribute to its strategic ambitions amidst rising geopolitical tensions. Through systematic analysis of diplomatic statements, media content, and bilateral relationships across three regional case studies — Africa, India, and Latin America — this research reveals that Russia's Global South engagement, while ideologically coherent on the surface, suffers from significant structural contradictions that undermine its strategic effectiveness.

Methodology and Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining discourse analysis and comparative case study methodology. The research design incorporates three complementary analytical frameworks:

Discourse analysis: systematic examination of official statements, diplomatic communications, and state media content from February 2022 to December 2024, focusing on recurring themes, narrative consistency, and rhetorical strategies. This frame was developed to identify recurring semantic clusters such as "multipolarity," "sovereignty," and "anti-colonialism"; strategic metaphors (e.g., the "World Majority" or "civilisational pole"); and patterns of actor positioning, especially Russia's portrayal as a moral counterweight to the West. The analysis tracks these discursive elements across time and platforms, allowing for the identification of both narrative coherence and internal contradictions.

Comparative case study analysis: in-depth examination of Russia's engagement patterns across three distinct regions (Africa, India, Latin America), selected based on varying levels of historical ties, economic integration, and geopolitical significance. Africa represents a site of revived postcolonial discourse and security partnerships; India embodies strategic ambiguity through its long-standing defence ties and current diversification efforts; Latin America, meanwhile, offers symbolic ideological alignment in the absence of deep material engagement. The diversity of these cases allows for the examination of how Russia adapts its messaging to fit different regional audiences, and how those audiences in turn respond.

Triangulation approach: cross-referencing Russian sources with target country responses, Western assessments, and independent regional analyses to identify gaps between stated objectives and practical outcomes. Russian materials are systematically cross-referenced with statements and responses from political elites, media narratives in the target countries, as well as independent regional and international assessments. Where available, the analysis also incorporates trade and investment statistics, public polling, and parliamentary records. This layered approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the gap between strategic narrative and tangible impact.

Data selection criteria:

- Official diplomatic statements and press releases from Russian Foreign Ministry;
- Bilateral trade and investment data from IMF and regional development banks;
- Media content from 'RT', 'Sputnik', and regional outlets;
- Parliamentary proceedings and government communications from partner countries;
- Independent polling and survey data [where available].

Limitations: this study relies primarily on publicly available sources and may not capture classified diplomatic communications or private business arrangements. The rapidly evolving nature of these relationships also means some assessments may become dated quickly.

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As Russia enters the third year of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it faces mounting geopolitical isolation and deepening estrangement from the West. In response, the Kremlin has intensified its diplomatic, economic, and ideological outreach to what it calls the "Global Majority"¹ — a loosely defined grouping of non-Western states, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This self-proclaimed pivot to the Global South seeks not only to compensate for the erosion of Russia's traditional partnerships, but also to reassert Moscow's relevance as a global power by promoting an "alternative world order" rooted in multipolarity, sovereignty, and anti-colonial resistance.

Yet, beneath the confident rhetoric and choreographed summits lies a more complex and often contradictory reality. Russia's Global South engagement, while symbolically potent, suffers from significant structural limitations, ranging from resource constraints and strategic overextension to growing dependence on a handful of partners such as China and India. Moreover, Moscow's narratives are increasingly contested by rival actors, including Western powers and importantly Ukraine itself, whose active diplomatic campaign in Africa has directly challenged Russia's monopolisation of the anti-colonial discourse².

This study argues that Russia's outreach to the Global South, though ideologically coherent on the surface, reveals a series of internal contradictions that undermine its strategic effectiveness. While Russian officials depict their country as a civilisational pole in a multipolar world, Moscow's foreign policy often replicates the very hierarchical and instrumentalist patterns it condemns in the West³. Additionally, the Kremlin's ability to sustain influence in these regions is constrained by the very war it launched in Ukraine, which has drained resources, prompted sanctions, and forced difficult trade-offs in regional priorities⁴.

¹ Global Affairs, "From the Non-West to the Majority," Fyodor Lukyanov, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-ne-zapada-k-bolshinstvu/>

² France24, "Ukraine vows long fight to counter Russia's 'grip' on Africa," August 17, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230817-ukraine-vows-long-fight-to-counter-russia-s-grip-on-africa>

³ Atlantic Council, "Putin's Anti-Colonial Posturing Should Not Fool the Global South," 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/vladimir-putins-anti-colonial-posturing-should-not-fool-the-global-south/>

⁴ Atlantic Council, "How Russia's pivot to the Global South weakens its grip on its neighbourhood," 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-russias-pivot-to-the-global-south-weakens-its-grip/>

To capture these dynamics, the paper proceeds in six parts. The first section explores the ideological foundations of Russia's Global South strategy, focusing on the narratives of anti-Western sovereignty and multipolar order. The second outlines the material and institutional constraints that limit Russia's ability to realise its ambitions. The third discusses the competitive environment in which Russia operates, including challenges posed by China, Western counter-initiatives, and Ukraine's diplomatic push. The subsequent sections examine three regional case studies: Africa, India, and Latin America, where Russia's strategy is implemented in markedly different forms. Together, these cases reveal a pattern of symbolic alignment and selective cooperation, rather than a cohesive bloc that can effectively offset Moscow's global marginalisation.

Russia's Strategic Narratives in the Global South

Russia's engagement with the Global South since 2022 is framed not merely as a reaction to sanctions and geopolitical estrangement but as the conscious articulation of a counter-hegemonic worldview. Through diplomatic statements, state-controlled media, official summits, and ideological appeals, the Kremlin has positioned itself as the vanguard of an emerging multipolar order, one defined by sovereign equality, cultural authenticity, and resistance to perceived Western moral and political imperialism⁵.

At the core of this narrative lies the idea of Russia as a civilisational alternative to the West. Russian elites frequently contrast their state with what they describe as the "decadence," "hypocrisy," and "ideological rigidity" of liberal democracies. In his address to the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, President Putin characterised Africa as a "rising center of power in the world" while positioning Russia as its natural partner against Western neo-colonialism⁶. The rhetoric emphasises traditional values, national sovereignty, and the rejection of externally imposed norms, especially on issues such as governance models, human rights, and identity politics. This civilisational framing is amplified through media platforms like 'RT' and 'Sputnik', which are tailored to resonate with audiences in the Global South⁷. In this framework, Russia is portrayed not as isolated or defeated but as morally superior and historically vindicated.

A second and overlapping narrative is that of the "World Majority." This term, used increasingly by Russian officials and publicists, implies that the vast majority of countries outside the Euro-Atlantic

⁵ Wilson Center, "Latin America Loves Russia Today (RT)," 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/latin-america-loves-russia-today-publication>

⁶ France24, "Russia and Africa agree to promote 'multipolar world order', says Putin," July 28, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230728-russia-and-africa-agree-to-promote-multipolar-world-order-says-putin>

⁷ The Conversation, "How Russia employs hard soft power to influence overseas media and sow dissent and fear," 2024, <https://theconversation.com/how-russia-employs-hard-soft-power-to-influence-overseas-media-and-sow-dissent-and-fear-among-foreign-populations-236976>

sphere sympathise with Russia's challenge to Western dominance⁸. The Kremlin suggests that postcolonial states see in Russia a partner that understands their struggle for dignity, sovereignty, and non-alignment. This narrative draws on selective reinterpretations of Soviet-era solidarity with liberation movements and recasts Russia as the inheritor of an anti-colonial legacy.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has been particularly active in promoting these themes, arguing in his 2014 UN General Assembly speech that "the United States-led Western alliance that portrayed itself as a champion of democracy in fact acted from the direct opposite position and rejected the democratic principle of sovereign equality of States"⁹. Russian media has consistently portrayed Western sanctions as economic coercion aimed at stifling sovereign development.

This messaging has proved particularly effective in rhetorical diplomacy. At events such as the 2023 Russia–Africa Summit or in BRICS+ forums, Russian officials consistently denounce the West for neocolonial attitudes and stress the "unfairness" of current global institutions¹⁰. Crucially, this discourse is not simply aimed at elite governments. Through what has been termed "hard soft power," Russian institutions export narratives via education exchanges, media, cultural diplomacy, and online disinformation campaigns that target young and politically active populations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. 'RT en Español', for instance, has become one of the most-viewed international networks in Latin America, broadcasting content that reinforces skepticism toward Western foreign policy and valorises Russian actions¹¹.

Yet these narratives, while strategically coherent, are not without contradictions. The portrayal of Russia as an anti-colonial power is difficult to reconcile with its own behaviour in Ukraine, particularly its annexation of territory and rhetoric denying Ukrainian nationhood¹². Likewise, its calls for multipolarity often coexist with practices that reproduce dependency and asymmetry, especially in its military and energy partnerships with smaller states.

In sum, Russia's strategic messaging in the Global South serves three main purposes: (1) to legitimise its confrontation with the West; (2) to attract diplomatic neutrality or support; and (3) to frame Moscow as an indispensable actor in any future global reordering. While these narratives resonate in certain political and media environments, their effectiveness is uneven and increasingly challenged by competing voices and real-world constraints.

⁸ Global Affairs, "From the Non-West to the Majority," Fyodor Lukyanov, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-ne-zapada-k-bolshinstvu/>

⁹ UN General Assembly, "Statement by Sergey V. Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation," September 27, 2014, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/69/meetings/gadebate/27sep/russianfederation.shtml>

¹⁰ Medium, "The Second Russia-Africa Summit and Its Discontents," 2023, <https://medium.com/the-diplomatic-pouch/analysis-the-second-russia-africa-summit-and-its-discontents-a2e9c4e6352c>

¹¹ Wilson Center, "Latin America Loves Russia Today (RT)," 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/latin-america-loves-russia-today-publication>

¹² Atlantic Council, "Putin's Anti-Colonial Posturing Should Not Fool the Global South," 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/vladimir-putins-anti-colonial-posturing-should-not-fool-the-global-south/>

Structural Limitations of Russia's Global South Strategy

While Russia's Global South narratives project strength and moral clarity, the actual implementation of its strategy reveals significant structural weaknesses. These limitations stem from a combination of domestic constraints, regional inconsistencies, and growing dependencies that restrict Moscow's capacity to act as an autonomous pole in a reconfigured global order.

First, Russia faces acute resource constraints. The war in Ukraine has consumed vast military, economic, and diplomatic resources, limiting the Kremlin's ability to deliver on its promises to partners abroad¹³. Budgetary pressure has intensified amid declining oil and gas revenues, growing domestic social obligations, and sanctions that restrict access to capital and technology. In Africa, for example, grand proclamations at Russia–Africa summits have not translated into substantive investments or expanded trade. Russia accounts for less than 1% of African foreign direct investment, and trade volumes remain modest at approximately \$18 billion in 2022, especially compared to China (\$254 billion), the EU (\$159 billion), or even India (\$89 billion)¹⁴. Military aid, grain shipments, and debt relief, often used as symbolic gestures, frequently fall short of recipient countries' expectations.

Second, Russia's strategy is riddled with ideological and geopolitical contradictions. Its anti-colonial messaging resonates with many audiences in the Global South, but is undercut by the invasion and partial annexation of Ukrainian territory, which many observers see as neocolonial in its own right. This contradiction became apparent during the 2023 Russia–Africa Summit, where "We would like the Black Sea initiative to be implemented and that the Black Sea should be open," South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said. "We are not here to plead for donations for the African continent"¹⁵. Several African leaders also expressed concerns about how the war exacerbates food insecurity and disrupts global grain supply chains.

Russia's selective historical memory also weakens its appeal. By invoking the Soviet Union's support for liberation movements, the Kremlin tries to anchor its legitimacy in Cold War-era solidarity. Yet, in practice, Russia often fails to match this legacy with concrete actions. Moreover, Moscow now aligns itself with authoritarian regimes and military juntas, further distancing itself from democratic or pluralistic aspirations in the Global South. This gap between symbolism and substance is increasingly visible.

Third, Russia's pivot to the Global South has increased its dependence on a narrow set of bilateral relationships, particularly with China and India. In the energy sector, Russia now relies heavily on Asian markets to offload its oil and gas exports, especially after being cut off from European

¹³ Atlantic Council, "Sanctions and the Russian War Economy," 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russias-war-economy/>

¹⁴ OSW (Centre for Eastern Studies), "Mutual Disappointment: Russia–Africa Summit," 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-02/mutual-disappointment-russia-africa-summit>

¹⁵ NPR, "African leaders leave Russia summit without grain deal or path to Ukraine peace," July 30, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/30/1190968770/african-leaders-leave-russia-summit-without-grain-deal-or-path-to-peace-in-ukraine>

customers¹⁶. While this reorientation has provided short-term relief, it also deepens Russia's strategic dependence on powerful regional actors that do not share Moscow's long-term ambitions. For instance, India has significantly increased its imports of discounted Russian oil but continues to diversify its arms purchases and strengthen security ties with the United States and other Western partners¹⁷. China, for its part, demands favourable terms in energy and trade deals, often requiring payment in yuan rather than rubles or dollars, reinforcing asymmetric dependencies that place Russia in a subordinate economic position¹⁸.

These imbalances challenge Moscow's claim to lead a "multipolar" order. In practice, Russia is increasingly functioning as a junior partner to Beijing in many parts of the Global South, particularly in Africa and Central Asia¹⁹. Although Russian elites are wary of China's dominance, they lack viable alternatives and are often compelled to follow China's lead in multilateral settings such as BRICS+ or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Meanwhile, countries in the Global South are aware of this dynamic and often treat Russia as a useful but limited actor — one that can balance Western influence but cannot replace it.

Finally, Russia's strategic reorientation toward the Global South has diminished its influence in its immediate neighbourhood. By diverting attention and resources away from the post-Soviet space, the Kremlin has left openings for other actors, including the EU, Turkey, and China, to expand their footprint in Central Asia and the Caucasus²⁰. Domestically, the toll of war, mobilisation, and international isolation has generated new vulnerabilities that weaken Russia's overall capacity to project power and manage peripheral engagements.

In summary, Russia's Global South policy is not underpinned by robust economic foundations or institutional depth. Instead, it relies on opportunistic diplomacy, heavily curated media messaging, and limited material incentives. The disconnect between Russia's grand narratives and its practical capabilities increasingly undermines its credibility, especially in regions where governments expect tangible benefits.

¹⁶ Bloomberg, "India Pivots Away From Russian Arms," 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-03/india-pivots-from-russia-to-us-for-cutting-edge-weapons>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Reuters, "India Refines Russian Oil, Pays in Yuan," 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/india-refiners-start-yuan-payments-russian-oil-imports-sources-2023-07-03/>

¹⁹ The Diplomat, "Russia's Shrinking Influence in Central Asia," 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/russias-shrinking-influence-in-central-asia/>

²⁰ Ibid.

Competitive Environment: Ukraine, the West, and China

Russia's strategy in the Global South does not operate in a vacuum. It faces growing competition from multiple actors, each of whom challenges Moscow's narrative authority, economic appeal, and diplomatic presence. These rivals range from traditional Western powers and rising global players like China, to less expected challengers such as Ukraine, whose intensified engagement in Africa and other non-Western regions directly undermines Russian efforts.

Ukraine's "counter-pivot" to Africa is among the most notable developments since 2022. Recognising that Russia had long monopolised anti-colonial rhetoric and positioned itself as Africa's ally, Kyiv launched a targeted diplomatic campaign to reshape perceptions. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba conducted multiple tours of African capitals, with his third tour beginning in July 2023²¹, opening new embassies and offering grain shipments under the "Grain from Ukraine" initiative. Ukrainian officials have emphasised shared postcolonial experiences, highlighting Ukraine's own fight against imperial domination and Russia's invasion as a contemporary form of colonial aggression. Speaking in Addis Ababa in May 2023, Kuleba said Ukraine was "very upset that some African countries chose to abstain" and called on them to lend Ukraine diplomatic support "in the face of Russian aggression"²².

This framing has resonated with some African leaders, several of whom have openly questioned Russia's credibility in claiming anti-imperial solidarity. During the Russian-African summit, president Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo urged Putin that the Russian invasion of Ukraine must end and that the African peace plan should not be underestimated²³.

Ukraine's efforts have been supported by Western actors, particularly the EU and the U.S., who have launched parallel initiatives to counter Russian influence in the Global South. These include infrastructure investments under the EU's Global Gateway and the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), as well as new diplomatic missions and summity with African and Southeast Asian nations²⁴. These programs explicitly offer alternatives to Russian (and Chinese) models of partnership, emphasising transparency, democratic governance, and long-term development.

The West also competes in the narrative domain. Western leaders and media outlets have increasingly exposed the contradictions in Russia's anti-colonial messaging, such as its domestic suppression of minorities, the destruction of Ukrainian cities, and its support for authoritarian

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Dmytro Kuleba starts his third tour of African countries," July 23, 2023, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/events/dmitro-kuleba-rozpochinaye-tretye-turne-kryainami-afriki>

²² Washington Times, "Ukraine Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba urges African nations to ditch neutrality in Russia war," May 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/may/24/ukraine-foreign-minister-dmytro-kuleba-urges-afric/>

²³ Wikipedia, "2023 Russia–Africa Summit," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Russia–Africa_Summit

²⁴ European Commission, "Global Gateway: A Strategy to Boost Sustainable Links," 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6433

regimes abroad²⁵. Public diplomacy campaigns and international media collaborations aim to reduce the effectiveness of Russian propaganda outlets like RT and Sputnik, especially in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. Fact-checking networks and digital media literacy initiatives [sometimes coordinated with local civil society groups] serve as additional tools in this narrative contest.

At the same time, China emerges as a more formidable and ambiguous competitor. While Russia and China often align in their criticism of U.S. global leadership and support for multipolarity, Beijing's approach to the Global South is markedly more strategic and resourced. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has committed over a trillion dollars in infrastructure funding across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, an economic footprint Russia cannot hope to match²⁶. In forums like BRICS+, Russia often finds itself as the junior partner, with China shaping agendas and dominating trade volumes²⁷.

This asymmetry with China is not merely economic. Beijing's diplomatic presence is larger, its soft power more agile, and its neutrality on the Ukraine war more palatable to many non-Western governments. In some regions, China and Russia compete for the same clients, particularly in arms sales, energy access, and port infrastructure²⁸. Beijing also cultivates influence more subtly, avoiding explicit ideological confrontation while quietly expanding its long-term dependencies.

Russia's challenge, then, is twofold: it must differentiate itself from the West's liberal universalism while avoiding becoming a proxy or dependent partner of China. In regions like Africa and Central Asia, this balancing act is becoming increasingly difficult. Russia's heavy reliance on coercive tools (military deployments, disinformation, regime protection) stands in contrast to the softer (but no less strategic) methods employed by its rivals.

In sum, the competitive landscape has become significantly more crowded and dynamic since 2022. While Russia has made limited inroads by exploiting grievances and promoting anti-Western solidarity, it now faces an increasingly coordinated pushback. Ukraine's diplomatic counteroffensive, Western development alternatives, and China's economic entrenchment all constrain the Kremlin's ability to shape the Global South on its own terms.

²⁵ The Conversation, "How Russia employs hard soft power to influence overseas media and sow dissent and fear among foreign populations," 2024, <https://theconversation.com/how-russia-employs-hard-soft-power-to-influence-overseas-media-and-sow-dissent-and-fear-among-foreign-populations-236976>

²⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, "China's Belt and Road: Impacts and Criticism," 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>

²⁷ Global Affairs, "From the Non-West to the Majority," Fyodor Lukyanov, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-ne-zapada-k-bolshinstvu/>

²⁸ Global Affairs, "From the Non-West to the Majority," Fyodor Lukyanov, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-ne-zapada-k-bolshinstvu/>

Regional Case Studies

5.1 Africa: Narrative Resonance vs. Material Limits

Africa has emerged as a central stage for Russia's Global South ambitions. Since 2022, Moscow has redoubled its efforts to present itself as a champion of a de-colonial world order, using historical references, symbolic gestures, and security partnerships to forge new ties across the continent. This region provides a powerful test case of how far Russia's narratives can travel and where they fall short.

Narrative Strategy

In its engagement with Africa, Russia relies heavily on anti-colonial and anti-Western narratives. At the 2023 Russia–Africa Summit in St. Petersburg, President Putin said that Russia and the African leaders attending had agreed to promote a "multipolar world order" and to fight neo-colonialism²⁹. The joint declaration called for "the establishment of a more just, balanced and stable multipolar world order, firmly opposing all types of international confrontation in the African continent"³⁰ and stated that Russia would support African countries' efforts to ensure compensation for colonial policies.

These messages find receptive audiences in parts of Francophone Africa, where resentment toward former colonial powers (particularly France) runs high. Russia's state media, especially 'RT Afrique' and 'Sputnik', amplify these themes, drawing connections between Western military interventions and ongoing instability³¹. The portrayal of Russia as a "non-colonial" power has helped foster emotional resonance, even as it clashes with Russia's own aggressive behaviour elsewhere.

Instruments of Influence

Moscow's African strategy also includes hard tools. Military cooperation has been a major entry point: Russia has signed dozens of security agreements across the continent and emerged as a key arms supplier accounting for roughly 30–40% of African arms imports in recent years³². The Wagner Group, Russia's private military proxy, has deployed forces to countries like Mali, Central

²⁹ France24, "Russia and Africa agree to promote 'multipolar world order', says Putin," July 28, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230728-russia-and-africa-agree-to-promote-multipolar-world-order-says-putin>

³⁰ Kremlin.ru, "Declaration of the Second Russia–Africa Summit," July 28, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5972>

³¹ The Conversation, "How Russia employs hard soft power to influence overseas media and sow dissent and fear among foreign populations," 2024, <https://theconversation.com/how-russia-employs-hard-soft-power-to-influence-overseas-media-and-sow-dissent-and-fear-among-foreign-populations-236976>

³² SIPRI, "Russia Remains Major Arms Supplier to Africa Despite Sanctions," 2023, <https://sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2023/russian-arms-exports-africa>

African Republic, and Sudan, offering regime protection and counterinsurgency support in exchange for mineral access and political loyalty³³.

Other forms of engagement, such as grain diplomacy, debt relief, and education programs, have supplemented Russia's outreach. At the 2023 summit, Putin promised to start shipping 25,000 to 50,000 tons of grain for free to each of six African nations in the next three to four months after exiting the Black Sea Grain Initiative³⁴. These gestures were meant to demonstrate goodwill and counter narratives of global food insecurity linked to Russia's war in Ukraine.

Diplomatic Impact

Moscow has achieved partial diplomatic success. A significant number of African states have either abstained or refused to condemn Russia's actions in UN votes since 2022. This ambivalence, often rooted in transactional calculations, provides Moscow with rhetorical ammunition: it can claim not to be isolated globally, and to have genuine support outside the West.

However, Russia's victories have clear limits. Fewer than 20 of Africa's 54 heads of state or government attended the Russia summit, while 43 attended the previous gathering in 2019³⁵. African leaders used the 2023 summit not only to express appreciation but also to raise uncomfortable truths. "This war must end. And it can only end on the basis of justice and reason," African Union Commission Chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat told Putin and African leaders³⁶. Their statements suggested that African governments are not passive recipients of Russian narratives, but rather pragmatic actors willing to engage multiple powers to their advantage.

Ukrainian Counter-pressure

Significantly, Ukraine has mounted an active diplomatic campaign to erode Russian influence on the continent. Kuleba began the first-ever tour of African countries in the history of Ukrainian diplomacy in October 2022, visiting Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Kenya³⁷. Kyiv's foreign minister has since conducted multiple African tours, opening new embassies, promoting direct grain exports, and framing Russia's war as neocolonial aggression. This has introduced a counter-narrative that resonates with Africa's own postcolonial experience.

Structural Constraints

³³ War on the Rocks, "Russia's Mercenary-Industrial Complex in Africa," 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/06/russias-mercenary-industrial-complex-in-africa/>

³⁴ Al Jazeera, "Putin promises grains, debt write-off as Russia seeks Africa allies," July 28, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/28/putin-promises-grains-debt-write-off-as-russia-seeks-africa-allies>

³⁵ NPR, "African leaders leave Russia summit without grain deal or path to Ukraine peace," July 30, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/30/1190968770/african-leaders-leave-russia-summit-without-grain-deal-or-path-to-peace-in-ukraine>

³⁶ Reuters, "African leaders tell Putin: 'We have a right to call for peace,'" July 28, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-tells-african-leaders-moscow-is-studying-their-ukraine-proposal-2023-07-28/>

³⁷ Ukrinform, "FM Kuleba outlines results of his African tour," October 18, 2022, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3595922-fm-kuleba-outlines-results-of-his-african-tour.html>

Despite rhetorical alignment, Russia's tangible footprint in Africa remains shallow. Trade volumes are limited (approximately \$18 billion in 2022), and less than 1% of African FDI originates from Russia³⁸. Infrastructure investment lags far behind China, the EU, and even India. Moreover, Wagner's involvement has been tainted by accusations of human rights abuses, undermining Russia's legitimacy as a development partner³⁹.

Finally, Russia's anti-colonial rhetoric is compromised by its behaviour in Ukraine. African observers are not oblivious to the irony: while denouncing imperialism abroad, Russia forcibly occupies territory in Europe⁴⁰. The credibility gap between Russia's normative messaging and its real-world practices is increasingly difficult to ignore.

Conclusion

The African case highlights both the appeal and the fragility of Russia's Global South strategy. Symbolic diplomacy and shared narratives offer short-term diplomatic dividends, but they cannot substitute for sustained investment, credible partnerships, or ethical consistency. African states remain open to Russian engagement, but they are far from unconditional allies.

5.2 India: Strategic Autonomy and Selective Alignment

India occupies a unique position in Russia's Global South strategy. As a long-time defence partner and rising global power, New Delhi offers Moscow economic relief and diplomatic symbolism. Yet India's own vision of a multipolar order does not imply alignment with Russia's goals. Instead, it reflects a balancing act rooted in national interest, strategic autonomy, and diversification. This dynamic makes the Russia–India relationship both valuable and precarious for the Kremlin.

Energy and Economic Cooperation

Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, India became one of Moscow's most important lifelines. Imports of Russian crude oil surged dramatically, with India purchasing over 1.75 million barrels per day by late 2023 — a 140% increase from the previous year⁴¹. These flows were driven by steep wartime discounts and a shared interest in bypassing Western financial systems. Russia

³⁸ OSW (Centre for Eastern Studies), "Mutual Disappointment: Russia–Africa Summit," 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-02/mutual-disappointment-russia-africa-summit>

³⁹ War on the Rocks, "Russia's Mercenary-Industrial Complex in Africa," 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/06/russias-mercenary-industrial-complex-in-africa/>

⁴⁰ Atlantic Council, "Putin's Anti-Colonial Posturing Should Not Fool the Global South," 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/vladimir-putins-anti-colonial-posturing-should-not-fool-the-global-south/>

⁴¹ Times of India, "India Becomes Top Buyer of Russian Oil," 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/europe-bought-russian-oil-via-india-at-record-rates-in-2023-despite-ukraine-war/articleshow/106777423.cms>

initially accepted payments in rupees, though currency conversion imbalances later necessitated payments in Chinese yuan⁴².

This energy cooperation served Moscow's twin goals: revenue diversification and narrative framing. Kremlin spokespeople consistently praised India's position as evidence of South–South solidarity and multipolar resistance. In return, Indian officials defended their oil purchases as consistent with their development needs and non-aligned foreign policy tradition.

Defense Legacy Under Pressure

Historically, Russia has been India's top arms supplier accounting for nearly 50% of Indian military imports over the last two decades⁴³. Key systems such as the S-400 air defence platform continued to be delivered after 2022. However, this defence pillar is weakening. Indian leaders have grown wary of over-dependence on any single supplier, especially one under heavy sanctions. New Delhi has increasingly turned to France, Israel, and the United States for advanced technologies and co-production opportunities.

In December 2024, Indian officials publicly emphasised their intent to reduce reliance on Russian arms, citing delays in delivery, sanctions-related payment issues, and the need for interoperability with Western systems⁴⁴. This trend signals a broader structural shift: Russia is no longer the undisputed cornerstone of India's defence calculus.

Diplomatic Coordination and Divergence

Despite differences, Moscow and New Delhi maintain close coordination in multilateral forums such as BRICS, the G20, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Russian officials have repeatedly supported India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, framing it as part of a fairer global governance structure⁴⁵.

India, in turn, has offered rhetorical cover for Russia's diplomatic ambitions by refusing to join sanctions, resisting Western pressure, and calling for dialogue instead of confrontation. At the 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi, Indian diplomats helped broker a final declaration that avoided directly blaming Russia for the war, a move that Moscow praised as evidence of "Global Majority" thinking⁴⁶.

⁴² Reuters, "India Refiners Start Yuan Payments for Russian Oil," July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/india-refiners-start-yuan-payments-russian-oil-imports-sources-2023-07-03/>

⁴³ SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

⁴⁴ Bloomberg, "India Pivots From Russia to US for Cutting-Edge Weapons," December 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-03/india-pivots-from-russia-to-us-for-cutting-edge-weapons>

⁴⁵ Anadolu Agency, "Russia Backs India's UN Security Council Bid," 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/russia-backs-indias-bid-for-permanent-membership-on-un-security-council/3270465>

⁴⁶ Reuters, "G20 summit avoids condemning Russia for Ukraine war, calls for peace," September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/g20-leaders-begin-two-day-summit-overshadowed-by-divisions-over-ukraine-2023-09-09/>

Yet this alignment has clear boundaries. India condemned the invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 at the UN and continues to reject the use of nuclear threats or coercive territorial claims. Prime Minister Modi's famous statement "This is not an era of war" was widely interpreted as a subtle rebuke to Moscow⁴⁷. India's vision of multipolarity includes cooperation with the U.S., Japan, and Australia through the Quad, and its Indo-Pacific strategy is shaped by concerns over China, not Western dominance.

Strategic Risks for Russia

For Moscow, India represents a paradox: a necessary partner whose autonomy complicates the narrative of alignment. While energy exports to India soften the blow of European sanctions, they come at deep discounts and do not translate into political loyalty. On defence, India's diversification undermines one of the last remaining pillars of Russian industrial exports.

Moreover, as Russia grows more dependent on China, its ability to act as a strategic counterweight in Asia diminishes. Indian officials are acutely aware of this shift and use it to their advantage. Russia's dual reliance limits its manoeuvrability and reduces its value as a strategic partner.

Conclusion

India offers Russia symbolic and material relief, but not strategic alignment. The relationship illustrates the selective nature of Global South solidarity: cooperation occurs on transactional, case-by-case terms, not out of shared ideology or vision. Russia can cite India as proof of non-isolation, but this is a fragile claim built on increasingly asymmetrical and conditional ties.

5.3 Latin America: Symbolic Ally, Distant Partner

Latin America represents one of the most ideologically receptive, but materially limited, frontiers for Russia's Global South engagement. Longstanding anti-U.S. sentiment in parts of the region provides fertile ground for Russian narratives centred on sovereignty, multipolarity, and resistance to Western interventionism. Yet Moscow's ability to convert symbolic alignment into tangible influence remains constrained by geography, capacity, and regional complexity.

Narrative Penetration Through Media Diplomacy

One of the most successful elements of Russia's Latin American strategy has been its Spanish-language media outreach. 'RT en Español' and 'Sputnik Mundo' have established robust digital and cable networks across the continent, often outperforming Western outlets in terms of social media engagement and audience reach⁴⁸. These platforms amplify Kremlin talking points: NATO is

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Wilson Center, "Latin America Loves Russia Today (RT)," 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/latin-america-loves-russia-today-publication>

portrayed as an aggressor, the West as hypocritical, and Russia as a misunderstood global actor resisting imperialism.

This messaging resonates strongly in countries like Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua — regimes with hostile stances toward the United States and active partnerships with Moscow. Even in more ambivalent democracies like Mexico or Brazil, surveys reveal substantial skepticism toward Western narratives of the Ukraine war⁴⁹. Russian media capitalise on these sentiments by invoking parallels between Latin America's colonial past and Ukraine's current struggle, positioning Moscow as an ally in the fight against external domination.

Diplomatic Engagement with the Populist Left

Since 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has visited several Latin American capitals including Brasília, Havana, Caracas, and Managua emphasising "respect for sovereignty" and praising the region as an "emerging center of the multipolar world"⁵⁰. In Brazil, President Lula da Silva has criticised NATO expansion and called for a negotiated peace in Ukraine, while resisting pressure to fully align with Western sanctions⁵¹.

Venezuela and Nicaragua, long-standing Russian partners, have gone further openly backing Russia in international forums and deepening military and economic ties. Nicaragua was among the few countries to recognise Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories⁵². Such rhetorical and diplomatic support gives Moscow symbolic wins on the global stage, helping it portray its isolation as incomplete.

Material Constraints and Strategic Limits

Despite this ideological affinity, Russia's actual presence in Latin America is limited. Trade volumes remain modest, far behind those of the U.S., EU, or China⁵³. Russian investment in infrastructure, energy, or development finance is negligible compared to Chinese loans and construction projects across the region. Even in the military sphere, cooperation remains largely symbolic: Russia has provided helicopters and training, but lacks the capacity to establish sustained defence partnerships or bases.

Moreover, Russia's alignment with authoritarian regimes alienates many liberal democracies in the region, such as Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay, which have condemned the invasion of Ukraine and expressed concern over Russian disinformation campaigns. The association with regimes accused

⁴⁹ CSIS, "Russia and Iran in Latin America: Same Outlook, Similar Playbooks," 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-iran-latin-america-same-outlook-similar-playbooks>

⁵⁰ Al Jazeera, "Lavrov to meet with Brazil's Lula as US fumes over Ukraine stance," April 17, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/17/lavrov-to-meet-with-brazils-lula-as-us-fumes-over-ukraine-stance>

⁵¹ United States Institute of Peace, "Lavrov in Latin America: Russia's Bid for a Multipolar World," April 20, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/lavrov-latin-america-russias-bid-multipolar-world>

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⁵³ Council on Foreign Relations, "China's Role in Latin America," 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-latin-america>

of repression, corruption, and economic mismanagement undermines Moscow's normative appeal.

Ideological Solidarity, Not Strategic Partnership

Russia's strength in Latin America lies in optics, not leverage. The Kremlin skilfully invokes shared ideological tropes (anti-imperialism, multipolarity, and cultural sovereignty) but lacks the tools to deliver real development alternatives. This gap is increasingly evident even among sympathetic audiences. For example, while 'RT en Español' remains widely viewed, many Latin Americans are also aware that Russia provides few tangible benefits and limited investment in their region⁵⁴.

Furthermore, Moscow's growing partnership with Iran in courting the Latin American left has raised eyebrows among populations wary of foreign ideological meddling or religious conservatism⁵⁵.

Conclusion

Latin America highlights the symbolic power of Russia's Global South strategy. While Moscow enjoys rhetorical support from certain regimes and media resonance among segments of the public, it lacks the economic, diplomatic, or strategic weight to become a true alternative partner. In this sense, Latin America is less a pillar of Russia's multipolar order and more a rhetorical stage upon which Moscow performs its global aspirations.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Russia's pivot to the Global South, often framed as a grand civilisational alternative to Western hegemony, is in reality a fragmented and contradictory endeavour. Across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Moscow has sought to build influence through a combination of ideological narratives, strategic messaging, and transactional diplomacy. While this strategy has yielded certain symbolic gains, such as diplomatic abstentions, rhetorical support, and expanded media reach, it is ultimately constrained by resource limitations, internal inconsistencies, and stiff competition from both traditional and unexpected actors.

In each regional case, Russia faces a familiar pattern: it achieves narrative resonance by appealing to anti-Western sentiment and invoking multipolarity, but lacks the economic and institutional tools to match its rhetorical ambitions. In Africa, grand anti-colonial gestures are increasingly undermined by poor economic follow-through and competition from Ukrainian diplomacy. In India, defence cooperation persists but is slowly eroding under the pressure of diversification and global

⁵⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, "Russia in Latin America: The Limits of Influence," July 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/russia-latin-america-limits-influence>

⁵⁵ CSIS, "Russia and Iran in Latin America: Same Outlook, Similar Playbooks," 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-iran-latin-america-same-outlook-similar-playbooks>

repositioning. In Latin America, Moscow's message reaches millions through RT en Español, but its strategic and economic footprint remains negligible.

Moreover, Russia's attempt to claim the mantle of an anti-colonial power is fatally weakened by its own imperial behaviour in Ukraine. Many in the Global South are skeptical of both Western and Russian narratives, and prefer to pursue flexible, multi-vector strategies that preserve autonomy. The "Global Majority" that Moscow invokes is less a coherent bloc than a patchwork of opportunistic alignments and cautious pragmatism.

Russia's reliance on symbolic gestures, militarised diplomacy, and curated media narratives reflects not a position of strength, but one of necessity. Sanctions, war-related overstretch, and strategic dependence (particularly on China) have diminished Moscow's capacity to act as a peer rival to the West or as a sustainable partner to the Global South.

Policy Implications for the West and Its Partners

Strengthen Competing Narratives. Western and Ukrainian actors should continue to challenge Russia's monopolisation of anti-colonial discourse by highlighting its actions in Ukraine and offering compelling alternatives rooted in partnership, dignity, and development. The success of Ukraine's African diplomatic tours demonstrates the effectiveness of direct engagement and counter-narratives.

Invest in Long-Term Relationships. Quick-response diplomacy is insufficient. The EU, U.S., and allied democracies must sustain engagement through education, infrastructure, health, and local partnerships that are visible and impactful beyond elite levels. The EU's Global Gateway and G7's PGII represent steps in the right direction but require consistent implementation and adequate funding.

Empower Regional Agency. Support for the Global South must go beyond geo-strategic competition. Empowering local civil society, media, and innovation ecosystems enhances resilience against external manipulation, whether from Russia, China, or others. This includes supporting fact-checking networks, media literacy programs, and independent journalism.

Avoid Binary Framing. Not all countries seek to "choose sides." Framing the global order as a zero-sum contest between the West and authoritarian rivals risks alienating partners who value autonomy. Multipolarity, when genuinely inclusive and cooperative, can be reconciled with liberal democratic norms. The key is demonstrating that Western partnerships offer more flexibility and respect for sovereignty than authoritarian alternatives.

Monitor and Respond to Hybrid Tools. Russia's use of private military actors, disinformation networks, and diplomatic theatre deserves close tracking. Targeted sanctions, legal accountability, and exposure of abuses (e.g., Wagner operations) can deter malign influence and strengthen

norms. The international arrest warrant against Putin demonstrates how legal mechanisms can constrain authoritarian leaders.

Coordinate Counter-Messaging. The fragmented nature of Western public diplomacy efforts reduces their effectiveness. Greater coordination between U.S., EU, and allied messaging [while respecting diverse perspectives] can amplify positive narratives about democratic governance and partnership models.

Support Ukrainian Diplomacy. Ukraine's diplomatic counter-offensive in Africa and other regions has proven remarkably effective at undermining Russian narratives. Western partners should provide diplomatic, logistical, and financial support for these efforts, recognising that Ukraine's own voice carries unique legitimacy in challenging Russian imperialism.

Final Reflections

This study reveals that Russia's Global South strategy, while tactically sophisticated in its narrative construction, suffers from fundamental strategic contradictions that limit its effectiveness. The gap between Moscow's grand rhetoric about multipolarity and civilisational alternatives, and its practical capacity to deliver tangible benefits, creates vulnerabilities that both competitors and partners can exploit.

The research methodology employed here, combining discourse analysis with comparative regional case studies, has illuminated patterns that might be missed by focusing solely on bilateral relationships or treating the Global South as a monolithic entity. Future research might benefit from longitudinal analysis of specific partnerships, quantitative assessment of narrative effectiveness through polling data, and deeper investigation into the role of non-state actors in Russia's outreach efforts.

For policymakers in the West, responding effectively requires more than rhetorical rebuttal — it demands a coherent, consistent, and locally rooted presence in the very regions Moscow seeks to court. The competitive landscape is complex and dynamic, but Russia's structural limitations create opportunities for those willing to offer genuine partnership based on mutual respect and tangible benefits.

The ultimate test of Russia's Global South strategy will not be measured in summit attendance or UN voting patterns, but in its ability to create lasting institutional changes that genuinely advance the interests of partner countries. On this metric, the evidence suggests that Russia's "alternative world order" remains more aspiration than reality.

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