# Russia's BRICS+ & SCO Strategy

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**Beyond the West: Russia's Diplomatic Strategy through BRICS+ & SCO**

## 1. Introduction

Since 2014, **Russia's foreign policy has undergone a profound reorientation**, driven by its annexation of Crimea and subsequent deterioration of relations with the West. These events initiated a steady pivot toward non-Western partners and institutions. This pivot sharply accelerated after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which brought unprecedented sanctions, economic decoupling, and near-total exclusion from Western-led forums. In this context, the main argument of this essay is that Russia has turned to alternative models of cooperation, chiefly BRICS+ and the

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as both a response to Western diplomatic isolation and a deliberate strategy to reaffirm its status as a great power. Moscow relies on these frameworks for economic lifelines, diplomatic platforms, and ideological arenas to contest Western norms. Yet, internal divisions and reliance on China within these groups limit their effectiveness as full substitutes for Western engagement.

This dual strategy, leveraging BRICS+ and the SCO as both a response to diplomatic isolation and a tool for securing great-power standing, is central to understanding Russia's evolving foreign policy. The following sections trace this reorientation, situating it in the context of Russia's great-power identity, its multipolar ambitions, and the specific benefits and constraints these coalitions offer.

## 2. Western Isolation, Great-Power Identity, and the Turn to Multipolarity

Russia's foreign policy shift since 2014 cannot be understood without the effects of Western exclusion and great-power identity in Moscow's worldview. The annexation of Crimea led to sanctions and suspended Russia from the G8 and Western forums (Sergunin, 2020). These actions began partially, but the 2022 Ukraine invasion brought sweeping sanctions, frozen reserves, and cut institutional ties with NATO and the EU.

**This isolation was not just economic, it challenged the symbolic core of Russia's international identity**. For Russian leaders, great-power status relies on being part of global decision-making, peer recognition, and a key role in resolving global issues. Exclusion from Western forums weakened both international and domestic legitimacy for the Kremlin, as it depends on projecting Russia as a central actor (Vuksanović, 2025; Lukin, 2015). Moskalenko et al. (2024) note Moscow sees Western policies as deliberate efforts to uphold a unipolar order and sideline Russia.

The Kremlin responded by building ties with the Global South and presenting itself as part of a "global majority" resisting Western dominance (Vuksanović, 2025). This outreach opened new trade and diplomatic opportunities and helped Putin counter isolation narratives by showing Russia as an essential global player. Gabuev (2025) notes that BRICS membership lets Moscow join a dynamic club of emerging powers shaping a "post-American" order.

This shift became an embrace of multipolarity, a view that the U.S.-led West is just one centre among several. Partnerships with China, India, and others strengthened this narrative (Gabuev, 2025; Vuksanović, 2025). Russian officials argued the Ukraine crisis showed the West wanted to preserve unipolarity, pushing Russia to the East and Global South (Lukin, 2015). A Russian analysis concluded the 2014 crisis had "consolidated BRICS... [helping] create a real multipolar world" (Lukin, 2015, p. 18).

In international relations terms, Russia's engagement with BRICS and the SCO reflects this multipolar outlook. These groups offer Moscow and partners ways to influence global governance outside Western institutions (Moskalenko et al., 2024; Brosig, 2024). Analysts say BRICS+ and the SCO help Russia weather sanctions and provide arenas to challenge Western-based global governance and promote multipolarity (Moskalenko et al., 2024). Russia's pivot is both reactive and an assertion of autonomy, aiming to reshape global structures for its own and other emerging powers' benefit (Moskalenko et al., 2024; Brosig, 2024).

By promoting norms of sovereignty and non-interference, Russia and its allies present their blocs as alternatives to Western liberal dominance (Moskalenko et al., 2024; Seshadri, 2023). This stance appeals to many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who distrust Western intervention and want pluralistic global leadership. For Moscow, aligning with BRICS and the SCO is both a practical move to escape isolation and a statement affirming its great-power identity within a multipolar world.

## 3. BRICS+: Russia's Alternative Coalition

One cornerstone of Russia's diversification strategy is BRICS, the bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (now expanding into "BRICS+" with new members and partners). Even before 2014, BRICS was touted by Moscow as a vehicle for a more equitable world order, but Western sanctions and isolation efforts gave this coalition new strategic importance. Moscow began using BRICS not only to pursue economic cooperation but explicitly "to counter Western economic sanctions and avoid international isolation."

Notably, in March 2014 the other BRICS countries shielded Russia diplomatically by abstaining from a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's actions in Crimea (Sergunin, 2020). Later that year, the BRICS foreign ministers jointly opposed calls to expel Russia from the G20 summit, thus preventing Moscow's geopolitical isolation by the West (Sergunin, 2020). Such solidarity sent a signal that Russia still had powerful friends, frustrating Western attempts to label it a pariah. As one report observes, "in 2014, fellow BRICS nations shielded Russian President Vladimir Putin from diplomatic exclusion after the annexation of Crimea" (Sergunin, 2020). The BRICS stance against punitive measures was principled as well: the 2014 BRICS Fortaleza Declaration pointedly condemned "unilateral military interventions and economic sanctions" as violations of international law (Seshadri, 2023).

**For Russia, BRICS became a crucial diplomatic and economic lifeline after 2014**, letting Moscow present itself as part of a dynamic club of non-Western powers shaping a "post-American" world (Gabuev, 2025). BRICS also serves as a sandbox for Russia to develop financial, trade, and technological tools outside U.S.-dominated mechanisms, including efforts

to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar and insulate against Western sanctions. While the desire to bypass Western economic constraints predates 2014, it gained urgency after the sanctions. BRICS enables Russia to amplify its narrative globally, uphold sovereignty, and coordinate diplomatic positions. Thus, BRICS helps Russia maintain practical ties and broadcast a normative challenge to Western leadership.

BRICS participation yields clear benefits for Moscow, supporting regime legitimacy through high-profile summits, offering protection against Western pressure by upholding sovereignty and non-interference, and boosting Russia's global prestige (Brosig, 2024). This framework enhances Russia's authority among developing countries and signals to domestic audiences that the country is not isolated, all while reinforcing core priorities on sovereignty and multipolarity (Vuksanović, 2025).

Equally important are the economic dividends of BRICS cooperation. As Western markets closed off, Russia expanded trade with BRICS partners, reorienting exports and finance toward the East and Global South. Scholars note that "the deepening of cooperation among BRICS economies has effectively promoted Russia's trade transformation" under sanctions (Li & Han, 2025, p. 108). For example, China rapidly grew as a buyer of Russian energy; by 2018 China alone accounted for 15% of Russia's foreign trade, a share that has only increased since (Gabuev, 2025). After Russia's broader invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this trend accelerated: China and India absorbed most of Russia's redirected crude oil exports, while Brazil (not part of sanctions) sharply increased imports of Russian diesel and other refined fuels (Ghanem, 2024). In 2023, Brazil's imports of Russian diesel surged by 4,600% year-on-year, vividly illustrating how BRICS economies undercut Western attempts to economically isolate Russia (Ghanem, 2024).

Furthermore, BRICS countries have coordinated to establish parallel financial mechanisms that reduce reliance on the West. They founded the New Development Bank (NDB) in 2015 (headquartered in Shanghai) and a $100 billion Contingent Reserve Arrangement, institutions meant to complement (and quietly challenge) the IMF/World Bank system (Gabuev, 2025). While not overtly anti-Western, these initiatives address the failure of existing Bretton Woods institutions to give emerging economies a fair voice (Gabuev, 2025). The BRICS also regularly discuss alternatives to the U.S. dollar in trade and have increased the use of local currencies in settlements (Gabuev, 2025). All of this aligns with Russia's interest in a more multipolar financial order. As Gabuev (2025) observes, Moscow wants to make global markets "less prone to U.S. sanctions," whether via new BRICS payment systems, trading hubs for commodities outside Western control, or other "BRICS ecosystem" ideas. Although progress is gradual (even Russia's own use of the NDB has been limited by global market realities), these efforts underscore how BRICS has become integral to Russia's long-term strategy for sanctions evasion and economic resilience.

Perhaps most telling was the symbolism of the October 2024 BRICS+ Summit in Kazan, Russia. By that time, BRICS had invited six new members (including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) and dozens of interested "partner" countries, a significant expansion dubbed "BRICS+" (Gabuev, 2025). As summit host, Moscow portrayed the expansion as a "defining moment" heralding a "post-Western world order in which the 'global majority' is finally empowered" (Vuksanović, 2025). President Putin, addressing the summit, extolled BRICS as the foundation for a "Pax Post-Americana" and lambasted Western neo-colonialism (Gabuev, 2025).

The Kazan summit was thus a propaganda victory for the Kremlin: it dramatically showcased Russia's ability to convene and lead a large coalition despite Western ostracism. Indeed, it was cited as clear proof of "the futility of Western efforts to isolate the country and Putin personally" (Gabuev, 2025). In Putin's narrative, initiatives like BRICS+ demonstrate that far from being alone, Russia is spearheading a powerful grouping that represents more than 40% of the world's population and a large share of global GDP (Gabuev, 2025). This message resonates in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where many states bristle at Western dominance. Even countries traditionally friendly with the West have shown interest in BRICS as a way to diversify their alignments without "choosing sides", for example, Indonesia joined BRICS in early 2025, and others like Saudi Arabia are set to follow (Gabuev, 2025). Thus, for Russia, BRICS has evolved into a centrepiece of its foreign policy: a multi-regional coalition that buttresses Russia's international standing while pursuing reforms toward a more multipolar global system.

(UN Photo/Anais Carolina Fernandes, 2025)

## 4. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Eurasian Diversification

Parallel to its BRICS activism, Russia has leaned on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as part of its "Turn to the East." The SCO was founded in 2001 by Russia, China, and four Central Asian states. It was originally focused on regional security and counterterrorism. Post-2014, however, Moscow tried to elevate the SCO's role in its foreign policy to compensate for frayed ties with the West. Russian officials explicitly linked tension with the West to greater SCO engagement. During Russia's 2015 chairmanship of the SCO (just after Crimea), the Kremlin pushed for further consolidation and new initiatives within the SCO. It hoped to invigorate the organization amid the Ukraine crisis fallout (Lukin, 2015). Moscow's aims included expanding SCO economic cooperation and perhaps using it as a geopolitical counterweight in Eurasia. The timing was no coincidence, as one observer put it, "the SCO... might be stimulated by the tension between Russia and the West." Russia worked to strengthen the body as its confrontation with NATO/EU intensified (Lukin, 2015).

Russia's strategic rationale for the SCO is multifaceted. First, the SCO offers a platform for deepening ties with China and Central Asian neighbours. Second, it allows Russia to manage Eurasian security issues without Western involvement and to present a unified stance on principles such as opposition to external interference. After 2014, Putin's government "continuously looked East, including to fellow SCO members, for diplomatic support" to break out of isolation (Lanteigne, 2018). In practice, this shift resulted in more frequent bilateral consultations and SCO summits, joint military exercises (notably the "Peace Mission" drills), and greater coordination on issues like Afghanistan. The inclusion of India and Pakistan in 2017, and Iran in 2023, also matched Russia's vision of building a broader Eurasian coalition, bringing together diverse, sometimes rival states under a loose, non-Western security framework.

However, Russia's SCO diplomacy has had mixed results. Other SCO members have been cautious not to endorse Russia's controversial actions outright. For instance, China and the Central Asian states remained neutral or muted regarding Russia's 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 Ukraine crisis (Lanteigne, 2018). They joined in general calls for dialogue and peace. However, they did not recognize Russia's unilateral moves. None recognized Crimea's annexation, similar to their stance on Georgia's breakaway regions (Lanteigne, 2018). A contemporary expert noted that "Moscow didn't get any [explicit] support aside from general statements" from its SCO allies in those instances. This highlights the "limits of Russia's influence" even among friendly authoritarian neighbors (Lanteigne, 2018). This reluctance stems partly from China's and others' own interests. Beijing, for example, values stability and was unwilling to jeopardize ties with the West or set precedents that might encourage separatism in its territory (Lanteigne, 2018). Central Asian members similarly balance between Russia, China, and the West. They were not ready to side unequivocally with Moscow. Thus, while the SCO provides Russia a forum for engagement, it has not functioned as an outright alliance backing Russia's every move.

Nonetheless, the SCO remains important for Russia's post-2014 foreign policy, serving three key functions. First, it anchors Russia in a regional coalition where Western states have no presence, supporting Moscow's idea of a "Greater Eurasia." Second, it enables Russia to intensify security and economic cooperation with China, exemplified by joint military drills (such as China's PLA participation in Russia's Vostok-2018 wargames under an SCO framework) and the promotion of large Eurasian projects (Lanteigne, 2018). Third, it offers a diplomatic stage at high-profile annual summits, allowing Putin to meet multiple Asian leaders and project Russia's influence. Especially after 2014, Russia's media emphasized Putin's engagement at SCO forums to demonstrate he's "not isolated" but welcomed in Beijing, New Delhi, and Tashkent. Even if the practical support is less robust than desired, the symbolic value remains significant. Russia has used SCO meetings, sometimes scheduled back-to-back with BRICS summits, to present

an alternative diplomatic calendar emphasizing East–South cooperation, as opposed to the Western summits from which it is excluded (Lanteigne, 2018).

In sum, the SCO is a pillar of Russia's diplomatic diversification: it solidifies Russia's pivot to Asia, helps manage its partnership with China, and reinforces the narrative of a "Greater Eurasia" that operates independently of Western blocs.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025)

## 5. Conclusion

Russia's turn toward BRICS+, the SCO, and other non-Western frameworks represents a fundamental reorientation of its foreign policy since 2014. Facing estrangement from the West, Moscow chose not to concede. Instead, it built alternative alliances and doubled down on a multipolar worldview. Institutions like BRICS and the SCO have become key instruments in this strategy. They allow Russia to maintain global engagement on its own terms, pursue economic opportunities, and lead a coalition of states similarly resistant to Western dominance.

This approach is multidisciplinary in appeal. It satisfies geopolitical goals (great-power balancing), economic needs (sanctions evasion and new growth markets), and ideological impulses (civilizational identity and regime security). While challenges remain, internal differences within BRICS/SCO and the ambivalence of some partners, Russia has clearly derived significant leverage from these groupings. As Vuksanović (2025) notes, the Kremlin's southward and eastward shift "seeks to demonstrate that Russia is not isolated internationally" despite Western opposition.

In doing so, Russia is essentially rewriting its foreign policy playbook. It is moving away from Euro-Atlantic integration. Instead, it champions clubs like BRICS+ and the SCO as foundations of a "post-West" international order. This broader diplomatic diversification is likely to persist. It has become intertwined with Russia's national narrative and its vision for a new global equilibrium where the West is just one of many power centers, not the uncontested arbiter of world affairs (Gabuev, 2025; Vuksanović, 2025).

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