



Reimagining Modernity: Russia's Geopolitical Strategy and Its Connection to Global Modernities

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Abstract

This paper explores Russia's geopolitical strategy and its connection to global modernities. Modernity, often understood as a product of Western development, is here reconceptualized by analyzing Russia's unique geopolitical position, historical legacies, and its continuous reimagination of modernity through foreign policy. The paper argues that Russia's modernity diverges significantly from the Western model, shaped by its imperial history, Soviet experiences, and the current geopolitical shifts under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Through examining Russia's foreign policies, its stance on global governance, and its engagement in multilateral platforms, this paper demonstrates how Russia's strategic aims align with its interpretation of modernity in the context of global political dynamics.

Keywords

Modernity, Geopolitical Strategy, Global Modernities, Foreign Policy, Imperial History, Soviet Legacy, Global Governance

Introduction

Modernity has traditionally been understood through the lens of Western experiences, often associated with secularization, industrialization, and liberal democracy. These values have shaped global conceptions of progress and development, particularly throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. However, as the 21st century unfolds, the geopolitical landscape is increasingly influenced by diverse and alternative models of modernity that challenge this Western-centric narrative. One of the most significant examples of such an alternative vision is Russia, which presents itself as a key player in reshaping global governance. Russia's geopolitical strategy is rooted in a deep historical and cultural context, which offers a distinct perspective on modernization and global influence. Its

foreign policy, shaped by the legacy of the Soviet Union and the complexities of post-Soviet identity, seeks to challenge the dominance of Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union. Russia advocates for a multipolar world order, where power is not concentrated in the hands of a few Western nations, but rather distributed across various global centers of influence. By positioning itself as both a challenger and a potential alternative to Western hegemony, Russia's approach to international relations represents a unique fusion of national sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and an alternative vision of modernity. This article aims to analyze how Russia's actions in global affairs ranging from its military interventions to its diplomatic engagements highlight its desire to assert its model of modernity, one that emphasizes sovereignty over liberal democratic values. Through this lens, Russia's geopolitical strategy is not merely a rejection of the Western model but an active effort to reimagine global governance, offering an alternative blueprint for the future of international relations.

Literature Review

Modernity and Its Multiple Interpretations

Modernity, as a concept, has been widely debated across disciplines, and its interpretations have evolved in response to changing historical, cultural, and political contexts. Traditionally, modernity has been associated with Western experiences of secularization, industrialization, and the rise of liberal democratic ideals (Giddens, 1990). These elements shaped the classical theories of modernity, particularly in the works of thinkers like Max Weber, who emphasized the rationalization process in the development of modern Western societies (Weber, 1905). For Weber, modernity was marked by a move away from traditional and religious forms of authority to rational and bureaucratic systems.

However, critics have pointed out that this Western-centric understanding of modernity is inadequate for capturing the diverse ways in which modernity is experienced around the world. The idea of multiple modernities, as proposed by Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000), challenges the notion of a single, universal path to modernity. Eisenstadt argued that modernity is not a monolithic process but one that takes different forms depending on cultural, religious, and political contexts. This view acknowledges that non-Western societies, such as those in East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, have developed their distinct trajectories of modernity, shaped by their unique historical experiences.

In addition, global power shifts and the rise of alternative modernities have prompted scholars like Arjun Appadurai (1996) to explore how globalization facilitates multiple interpretations of modernity. Appadurai emphasized the role of cultural flows and the hybridization of identities in shaping modernity, highlighting the tensions between local traditions and global influences.

Russia's Historical Context and the Development of Its Own Modernity

Russia's historical context plays a pivotal role in shaping its unique conception of modernity, which contrasts with the Western model. The trajectory of Russian modernity is deeply intertwined with its imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet histories, creating a distinct path that challenges dominant Western narratives.

The Tsarist era laid the groundwork for Russia's complex relationship with modernity, as it struggled to reconcile its autocratic traditions with the demands of modernization in the 19th century. Thinkers like Alexander Herzen and Pyotr Kropotkin critiqued the Western model of industrialization and democracy, advocating for a uniquely Russian path to progress that emphasized collectivism over individualism (Herzen, 1854). This tension between autocracy and modernization persisted into the Soviet period.

The Soviet Union, under leaders like Lenin and Stalin, sought to construct a socialist modernity that was distinct from the capitalist Western model. The Soviet project aimed to challenge capitalist industrialization while promoting state-led modernization, focusing on rapid industrialization and collectivization. However, this vision was often marked by authoritarianism and suppression of individual freedoms, reflecting Russia's historical experience of centralized power (Fitzpatrick, 1999). The Soviet model of modernity was therefore based on a vision of progress through collective control, rather than the individual liberties and market-driven progress championed by the West.

Post-Soviet Russia, emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union, has evolved a form of modernity that integrates its Soviet legacy with the realities of a globalized, multipolar world order. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia has adopted a modernity that prioritizes state sovereignty, fosters national pride, and resists Western liberalism, presenting itself as an alternative model of governance. (Mankoff, 2009). This modernity combines elements of Soviet nostalgia with a new emphasis on authoritarian governance and economic pragmatism.

In sum, Russia's historical experience has shaped a distinctive modernity that rejects Western ideals of liberal democracy and embraces state-centred development.

Putin's Geopolitical Strategy and the Reinvention of Russia's Identity

Vladimir Putin's geopolitical strategy has been central to reshaping Russia's identity in the post-Soviet era, emphasizing nationalism, state sovereignty, and resistance to Western liberalism. Putin's leadership has been marked by a clear aim to restore Russia's status as a global power, rejecting the liberal, Western-dominated world order that emerged after the Cold War. His vision for Russia's future is rooted in the idea of a strong, centralized state that draws on both Soviet and Tsarist legacies, blending nationalism with an assertive foreign policy.

Putin's geopolitical strategy is often framed as a reaction to the perceived encroachment of Western influence, particularly through institutions like NATO and the European Union. As Roberts (2012) notes, Putin's foreign policy is driven by a desire to reassert Russia's influence in its near abroad, particularly in former Soviet states like Ukraine and Georgia, where the West has made inroads. This is evident in Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which was presented as a restoration of Russia's rightful historical and cultural influence over Ukraine.

Putin's actions reflect a desire to protect Russia from what he views as the destabilizing effects of Western interventionism (Sakwa, 2015).

Furthermore, Putin's leadership has sought to reinforce a sense of Russian exceptionalism. This is reflected in the promotion of conservative values, including the protection of Russian Orthodoxy, traditional family structures, and national pride. According to Rojansky (2017), Putin's narrative of Russian identity challenges the liberal values of democracy and human rights that the West promotes, offering instead a model of governance that emphasizes state control and stability.

Putin's geopolitical strategy is deeply intertwined with his efforts to reinvent Russia's identity as a powerful, independent, and non-Western state, positioning Russia as an alternative to the Western liberal order.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using document analysis to examine primary and secondary sources related to Russia's geopolitical strategy. These include government publications, policy speeches by President Vladimir Putin, official documents from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and scholarly articles on Russian modernity and geopolitics. A comparative analysis is also conducted between Russia's geopolitical actions and the West's modernity narratives, focusing on the implications of Russia's self-perception as an alternative model to the Western-dominated global order.

Russia's Geopolitical Strategy

Historical Influences on Russian Geopolitics

Russia's geopolitical identity has been profoundly shaped by its historical experiences, from its imperial past to its Soviet legacy and post-Soviet transitions. The Mongol invasion of the 13th century was a pivotal event that shaped Russia's political structure, instilling a sense of territorial expansionism and centralized power (Rounding, 2012). The Mongol yoke left an indelible mark on Russian governance, fostering a culture of autocracy and state control, which persisted throughout Russian history.

During the Tsarist era, Russia's imperial ambitions further entrenched its geopolitical outlook. Tsarist expansionism, particularly under rulers like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, sought to secure Russia's position as a major European power (Kaus, 1935). The Russian Empire's quest for influence in Central Asia, the Balkans, and the Black Sea region laid the foundations for Russia's modern territorial aspirations. This imperialist legacy also fostered a deep-seated distrust of Western powers and a drive for territorial security.

The Soviet Union, established in 1922, introduced a new phase in Russia's geopolitical strategy, with an emphasis on ideological and military power. The Soviet model prioritized global revolution and the spread of Marxist-Leninist ideology, positioning Russia as a counterweight to Western capitalist powers during the Cold War (Fitzpatrick, 2000). The USSR's collapse in 1991, however, left Russia facing the challenge of reconstructing its global position, leading to a resurgence of nationalistic rhetoric under Vladimir Putin. Putin's policies have sought to restore Russia's stature on the global stage, often through strategic military interventions, such as the

annexation of Crimea in 2014, reflecting the continuation of Russia's historical emphasis on security and territorial integrity (Sakwa, 2014).

These historical influences continue to shape Russia's geopolitical strategy today, as the nation seeks to redefine its modern identity while asserting its influence in global affairs.

Putin's Vision of a Multipolar World

Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia has consistently advocated for a multipolar world order, emphasizing the need for a global system that is not dominated by a single hegemonic power, particularly the United States and its Western allies. Putin's vision seeks to reshape global governance, promoting a more balanced distribution of power among various states and regions. This vision is largely driven by Russia's historical experiences of being subordinated to Western powers and its desire to reclaim its influence on the world stage.

Central to Putin's multipolar vision is his opposition to NATO's expansion, which he views as a direct threat to Russia's security and sovereignty. The inclusion of Eastern European countries in NATO, particularly after the Cold War, is seen by Russia as an encroachment into its sphere of influence. Putin has consistently voiced his concerns about NATO's eastward expansion, describing it as an attempt to isolate Russia and undermine its geopolitical interests (Mearsheimer, 2014). In response, Russia has taken steps to strengthen its military capabilities and form strategic partnerships with other countries to counterbalance NATO's influence.

A key element of Putin's multipolar vision is Russia's strategic partnership with China. The growing Russia-China alliance has become a significant counterweight to Western influence, particularly in the realms of economic and military cooperation. The two countries have developed strong bilateral ties, which include trade agreements, energy deals, and coordinated efforts in international organizations (Stent, 2020). This partnership challenges the U.S.-led unipolar order and provides an alternative to Western dominance in global affairs.

Additionally, Russia's active role in the United Nations reflects its commitment to promoting a multipolar world. By using its veto power in the Security Council, Russia seeks to shape international policies that reflect its interests and counterbalance the dominance of Western powers (Mankoff, 2009).

Putin's advocacy for a multipolar world order is essential to his broader foreign policy strategy, which aims to redistribute global power and challenge Western hegemony.

Conflict and Cooperation with the West

Russia's foreign policy under Vladimir Putin has consistently oscillated between conflict and cooperation with Western powers, reflecting a complex strategy that seeks both integration into the global economy and resistance to Western influence. This dual approach is marked by Russia's active participation in multilateral forums, such as the G20 and the BRICS group, alongside its adversarial stance toward NATO and the European Union, particularly since the 2014 Ukraine crisis.

On the one hand, Russia recognizes the importance of economic integration with the global market, which is evident in its participation in the G20, where it engages with major global powers on issues of trade, finance, and

global governance (Götz, 2018). Furthermore, through the BRICS grouping—comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—Russia has sought to strengthen ties with emerging economies and challenge the economic dominance of Western countries, particularly the United States. The BRICS platform provides Russia with an opportunity to advocate for reforms to global financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which it perceives as biased towards Western interests (Stuenkel, 2016).

On the other hand, Russia's relationship with Western powers has been fraught with tension, especially following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine. These actions have led to sanctions from the European Union and NATO, exacerbating Russia's adversarial stance toward the West. Putin has consistently framed NATO's expansion and Western interventions in former Soviet territories as existential threats to Russia's security and sovereignty (Sakwa, 2015). The conflict in Ukraine and Russia's subsequent military actions further entrenched this divide, positioning Russia as a staunch opponent to Western-led liberal internationalism.

Russia's foreign policy reflects a contradictory strategy seeking cooperation with the global economy and multilateral institutions while simultaneously challenging Western hegemony through regional assertiveness and military interventions.

The Eurasian Economic Union and Russian Modernity

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is a cornerstone of Russia's geopolitical strategy, reflecting its vision of a distinct modernity that contrasts with the liberal capitalist model promoted by the West. Formed in 2015, the EEU is an economic bloc that includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, with the goal of creating a regional integration platform that mirrors the European Union but under Russian leadership. Through the EEU, Russia seeks to consolidate its influence over former Soviet republics, reintegrating them into its sphere of influence and promoting a model of modernity that challenges the Western-dominated global order.

The EEU serves not only as an economic partnership but also as a political tool to assert Russian dominance in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. It allows Russia to position itself as the central power in the region, influencing the economic policies, trade agreements, and political alignments of its member states (Lukyanov, 2015). Russia's leadership of the EEU is framed as a counterpoint to Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO, which Russia views as instruments of Western hegemony. By promoting regional integration under its own auspices, Russia seeks to create an alternative to the Western-led global order and reinforce its vision of a multipolar world (Hansson, 2017).

Additionally, the EEU reflects Russia's broader strategy of crafting a distinctive modernity that diverges from Western ideals of liberal democracy and market-driven capitalism. Instead, Russia promotes a model that emphasizes state sovereignty, regional cooperation, and protectionist economic policies. This vision of modernity is grounded in Russia's historical experience of centralized power and its rejection of Western interventionism (Götz, 2018). Through the EEU, Russia aims to project an image of modernity that balances economic growth with political control, offering an alternative development model for post-Soviet states.

The EEU is a key vehicle through which Russia asserts its geopolitical and economic influence, advancing a vision of modernity that contrasts sharply with the liberal capitalist order championed by the West.

Russia and Global Governance

Russia's Role in Global Institutions

Russia's approach to global governance is deeply rooted in its desire to preserve state sovereignty and maintain control over its internal affairs. This principle is evident in Russia's actions within international institutions, particularly the United Nations (UN) Security Council, where it has utilized its veto power to block resolutions that it perceives as detrimental to its national interests. Russia's position in the Security Council reflects its broader strategy of resisting foreign interference and asserting its role as a key player in shaping global governance (Mankoff, 2009). Russia's veto power has been used strategically to prevent UN resolutions that could challenge its geopolitical priorities, such as in the cases of Syria and Ukraine, where Moscow has blocked interventions that it views as Western-led efforts to impose regime change or undermine its influence in the region (Sakwa, 2015).

Beyond the UN, Russia has actively sought to strengthen its ties with non-Western countries, particularly in Asia, through organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO, founded in 2001, includes China, India, and several Central Asian states and serves as a platform for fostering regional cooperation in security, economic, and political matters. Russia's role in the SCO underscores its ambition to foster a multipolar world order and counterbalance Western influence, particularly in the face of the U.S. dominance in global institutions. The organization enables Russia to enhance its strategic partnerships with key Asian powers, especially China, and to promote regional security initiatives that align with its interests (Lukin, 2017).

Russia's engagement with these global institutions is not only about preserving its sovereignty but also about positioning itself as a counterweight to Western hegemony. By leveraging its influence in the UN and other multilateral organizations, Russia seeks to reshape the global order in a way that reflects its vision of a more balanced, multipolar world.

The Concept of Sovereign Democracy

The concept of sovereign democracy was introduced by Vladimir Putin's government in the early 2000s as a response to the perceived failures of Western liberal democracy, particularly in the post-Soviet context. Sovereign democracy asserts that Russia should develop its own form of democracy, one that is tailored to its unique historical, cultural, and political environment, rather than adopting Western liberal democratic models. This vision of democracy prioritizes state sovereignty, stability, and control, framing Russia as a nation with its own distinct political trajectory that cannot be dictated by external models or standards (Pascual, 2006).

At the core of sovereign democracy is the belief that Russia's national identity, which is rooted in its Orthodox Christian heritage and its Soviet past, must shape its political system. In contrast to Western democracy, which is often associated with individual rights and a liberal political order, sovereign democracy emphasizes the role

of the state in ensuring social order and protecting the collective good. Putin's government argues that a strong state is essential for maintaining Russia's territorial integrity, economic stability, and social cohesion (Dmitriev, 2013). Sovereign democracy, therefore, envisions a political system where democratic processes exist but are shaped by the needs of the nation, with an emphasis on national unity and the leadership of a central authority. Critics of sovereign democracy argue that it serves as a guide for autocratic rule, allowing Putin to consolidate power while undermining the democratic principles of political pluralism and individual freedoms (Müller, 2017). However, proponents contend that it offers a model of governance that is more suited to Russia's historical realities and challenges, advocating for a pragmatic approach to democracy that balances state authority with popular support. Sovereign democracy reflects Russia's desire to chart its course in the global political system, asserting its right to self-determination while rejecting Western prescriptions of democracy.

Reimagining Modernity: Russia's Alternative Vision

Russia's Historical Reinterpretation of Modernity

Russia's historical reinterpretation of modernity plays a critical role in shaping its geopolitical strategy, particularly under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. The Soviet Union's vision of modernity was fundamentally grounded in Marxist-Leninist ideologies, which emphasized state control and collective effort as central pillars in the transformation of society. In the Soviet model, modernity was associated with industrialization, collectivization, and the establishment of a centrally planned economy that sought to transcend capitalism through socialist principles (Fitzpatrick, 2015). The Soviet state acted as the engine of progress, driving technological advancement and societal change through collective state efforts, with little regard for individual freedoms or market forces.

In contrast, post-Soviet Russia, particularly under Putin, has pursued a radically different vision of modernity. Putin's interpretation emphasizes a synthesis of nationalism, traditionalism, and state-driven capitalism, positioning Russia as a unique civilization that must chart its own course in the modern world. This reimagining of modernity incorporates elements of Russian Orthodox Christianity, conservatism, and a rejection of Western liberalism (Kuzio, 2015). The Russian state plays a central role in guiding the economy, not through Marxist ideals but through a form of state capitalism, where strategic sectors are controlled by the state or by close political allies. This model is contrasted with the Western capitalist model that places emphasis on individual freedoms, market-driven economics, and minimal state intervention (Åslund, 2015).

Putin's vision also draws on historical narratives, framing Russia's modernity as a unique evolution of its imperial and Soviet past. This reinterpretation emphasizes Russia's civilizational identity as distinct from Western liberal democracies and portrays the state as the guarantor of national unity and sovereignty. As a result, Russia's current geopolitical strategy is deeply entwined with this reimagined modernity, which seeks to balance traditional Russian values with the demands of global power politics.

Russia's Modernity and the Multipolar World

Russia's emphasis on a multipolar world is a cornerstone of its vision of modernity, positioning itself as a challenger to the Western-led, liberal global order. While the West promotes a universalized vision of modernity based on globalization, market-driven economies, and liberal democratic values, Russia advocates for a more fragmented, regionally specific conception of modernity that prioritizes state sovereignty, national interests, and cultural identity (Sakwa, 2015). This vision is intrinsically linked to Russia's geopolitical strategy, which seeks to reshape global governance in a way that reflects a multipolar world order, where power is distributed among several influential states rather than being concentrated in a single hegemonic power, such as the United States or the European Union (Götz, 2018).

Russia's rejection of Western-centric modernity is rooted in its belief that the liberal global order, with its emphasis on universal norms and human rights, often disregards the unique cultural, political, and historical contexts of non-Western countries (Lukin, 2017). For Russia, modernity is not a one-size-fits-all concept but rather a dynamic process shaped by regional identities and traditions. This alternative vision of modernity places greater importance on maintaining national sovereignty and cultural values, particularly through the reinforcement of traditional institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church and state-controlled capitalism (Müller, 2017).

By advocating for a multipolar world, Russia seeks to position itself as a central player in global governance, one that defends the principle of non-interference in sovereign affairs and challenges the imposition of Western values on other regions. In this vision, modernity is not about homogenizing the world under a singular liberal framework but about embracing diversity in political systems, economic models, and cultural identities. Russia's geopolitical strategy, therefore, represents a deliberate attempt to offer an alternative modernity that centers on state power, national identity, and regional cooperation over the pursuit of a global, liberal order.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Russia's geopolitical strategy is deeply intertwined with its reimagining of modernity, reflecting a synthesis of its imperial past, Soviet legacy, and contemporary global ambitions. Unlike the Western model of modernity, rooted in liberal capitalism, globalization, and institutional frameworks that emphasize individual freedoms and market-driven development, Russia offers an alternative vision. This vision is informed by a history of centralized power, territorial expansion, and a unique blend of traditionalism and state-driven modernization. By asserting its sovereignty and promoting a multipolar world order, Russia seeks to redefine global governance in ways that challenge Western hegemony. Russia's foreign policies, including its strategic alliances with non-Western nations, its emphasis on cultural and political self-determination, and its military interventions, showcase its commitment to reshaping international dynamics. This approach aligns with a broader attempt to advocate for diverse forms of modernity that reflect regional and cultural specificities, moving beyond the Western-centric narrative. As global power dynamics shift, understanding Russia's distinct geopolitical vision is critical to appreciating the broader evolution of global modernities. By positioning itself as both a challenger to and an

alternative within the international system, Russia highlights the complexity of modernity in a multipolar world, emphasizing the coexistence of competing worldviews and strategies.

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