

UDC 32

DOI: 10.34670/AR.2026.74.20.010

A Comparative Study of the Strategic and Policy Approaches of China and Russia in the Global South

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Abstract

This article examines and compares the strategic and policy approaches of China and Russia toward the Global South in the context of contemporary transformations of the international system. The Global South has become an increasingly important arena for great power competition, economic cooperation, and political influence, making the analysis of external actors' strategies particularly relevant. The purpose of this study is to identify the key goals, instruments, and priorities shaping Chinese and Russian engagement with countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The research is based on a comparative qualitative analysis of official strategic documents, policy statements, and analytical materials related to China's and Russia's foreign policy activities in the Global South. Special attention is paid to economic, political, and security dimensions of their engagement, including development initiatives, diplomatic practices, and security cooperation mechanisms. The results of the study demonstrate that China's approach is predominantly characterized by long-term economic integration, infrastructure investment, and institutionalized development frameworks, while Russia's strategy relies more heavily on political dialogue, security cooperation, and flexible bilateral partnerships. Despite shared rhetoric supporting multipolarity and sovereignty, the two countries employ distinct models of interaction with the Global South. The article concludes that these differences reflect divergent resource bases, strategic cultures, and foreign policy priorities, which in turn shape the prospects and limitations of Chinese and Russian influence in the Global South. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary non-Western foreign policy strategies and their implications for the evolving global order.

For citation

Lin Hao (2026) A Comparative Study of the Strategic and Policy Approaches of China and Russia in the Global South. *Teorii i problemy politicheskikh issledovaniy* [Theories and Problems of Political Studies], 15 (1A), pp. 67-73. DOI: 10.34670/AR.2026.74.20.010

Keywords

Global South, China, Russia, Foreign Policy Strategy, Comparative Analysis, Multipolarity, International Relations, Developing Countries.

Introduction

The Global South has become a pivotal arena of contemporary international relations amid the ongoing transformation of the global political and economic order. Countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East are no longer passive recipients of external influence but increasingly act as autonomous participants shaping regional and global agendas. In this context, the growing engagement of non-Western powers, particularly China and Russia, represents a significant shift away from traditional Western-centric models of global governance.

Both China and Russia consistently emphasize their commitment to the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and multipolarity in their foreign policy discourse. However, despite similar rhetorical positioning, their strategic and policy approaches toward the Global South differ in terms of priorities, instruments, and long-term objectives. China's engagement is largely embedded in comprehensive economic and development-oriented frameworks, while Russia's presence is more selective and concentrated in political, diplomatic, and security-related domains.

The relevance of this study is determined by the increasing importance of the Global South in global decision-making processes and by the need to assess how alternative power centers interact with developing regions. Existing scholarship often examines Chinese and Russian policies separately, which limits the understanding of their comparative advantages, constraints, and potential areas of competition or complementarity. This article addresses this gap by offering a systematic comparative analysis of the two countries' strategies.

The scientific novelty of the research lies in its integrated comparison of Chinese and Russian approaches across economic, political, and security dimensions, based on original analysis of primary policy documents and contemporary academic literature. The study seeks to contribute to political science research by clarifying the distinctive features of non-Western foreign policy strategies and by assessing their implications for the future of the Global South and the evolving international system.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative comparative research design aimed at identifying similarities and differences in the strategic and policy approaches of China and Russia toward the Global South. The comparative method is applied to examine how each country formulates objectives, selects policy instruments, and prioritizes regions and sectors within developing countries.

The empirical basis of the research consists primarily of original sources, including official foreign policy strategies, government programs, policy papers, leaders' speeches, and institutional documents related to China's and Russia's engagement with the Global South. These materials are complemented by peer-reviewed academic publications and analytical reports that provide contextual interpretation without substituting primary evidence.

The analysis is structured along three core dimensions: economic engagement, political and diplomatic interaction, and security cooperation. This multidimensional framework allows for a systematic assessment of both comprehensive and sector-specific approaches, as well as for the identification of long-term strategic patterns. Particular attention is paid to the consistency between declared policy goals and actual practices.

To ensure analytical rigor and originality, the study avoids descriptive narration and focuses on interpretative comparison and synthesis. The methodological approach enables the identification of structural factors shaping Chinese and Russian policies, including resource availability, institutional

capacity, and strategic culture. This framework provides a basis for evaluating the effectiveness and sustainability of their respective approaches in the Global South.

China's Strategic and Policy Approach in the Global South

China's engagement with the Global South is characterized by a comprehensive and long-term strategic vision that integrates economic, political, and institutional components. Over the past two decades, Beijing has consistently expanded its presence in developing regions by positioning itself as a development partner rather than a traditional geopolitical actor. This approach is grounded in the principle of mutual benefit and non-interference, which resonates with many governments in the Global South.

The economic dimension represents the core of China's strategy. Large-scale infrastructure investment, trade expansion, and financial cooperation constitute the primary instruments through which China consolidates its influence, notably through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and related development frameworks [State Council Information Office, 2023]. Development initiatives are framed as mechanisms for addressing structural deficits in transportation, energy, and industrial capacity, and are increasingly articulated through the Global Development Initiative (GDI) concept and its implementation mechanisms [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021]. In transportation, energy, and industrial capacity, thereby linking Chinese economic interests with local development agendas. This model allows China to secure access to resources, markets, and logistics corridors while maintaining a narrative of shared growth.

Politically, China emphasizes diplomatic engagement through multilateral forums and bilateral partnerships. It actively promotes South–South cooperation and presents itself as a representative of developing countries' interests in global governance institutions. Unlike Western approaches that often condition cooperation on political or normative requirements, China's diplomacy prioritizes state sovereignty and regime stability, which enhances its attractiveness for a wide range of political systems.

Security cooperation occupies a secondary but increasingly visible role in China's Global South policy, particularly in the context of Beijing's Global Security Initiative (GSI) agenda and related cooperation priorities [Xinhua News Agency, 2023]. While Beijing traditionally avoided direct involvement in regional security issues, recent years have witnessed a gradual expansion of peacekeeping participation, military training programs, and arms exports. These activities, however, remain closely linked to economic interests and the protection of overseas investments rather than to the establishment of formal security alliances.

Overall, China's strategic approach in the Global South can be described as development-centered and institutionally embedded. Its effectiveness derives from the scale of economic resources, policy consistency, and the ability to align national interests with the development priorities of partner countries. At the same time, concerns related to debt sustainability, economic dependency, and asymmetrical power relations pose long-term challenges to the sustainability of this model.

Russia's Strategic and Policy Approach in the Global South

Russia's engagement with the Global South is shaped by a more selective and pragmatic strategic framework, reflecting both structural constraints and distinct foreign policy priorities. Unlike China's comprehensive development-oriented model, Russia emphasizes political dialogue, security

cooperation, and flexible bilateral partnerships as the core instruments of its influence in non-Western regions.

Politically, Russia positions itself as an advocate of state sovereignty, non-interference, and resistance to external pressure, as reflected in the 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023]. Diplomatic engagement with countries of the Global South often focuses on building partnerships based on shared positions in international organizations and support for a multipolar international system. This political alignment allows Russia to expand its diplomatic presence despite comparatively limited economic resources.

Security cooperation represents a central pillar of Russia's approach. Military-technical cooperation, arms exports, joint training programs, and advisory assistance are among the key mechanisms through which Russia strengthens ties with partner states; in Africa, Russia remained a leading supplier of major arms in 2019–2023 [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2024]. through which Russia strengthens ties with partner states. In several regions, particularly in parts of Africa and the Middle East, security cooperation serves as the primary channel of engagement and often precedes broader political or economic interaction; this emphasis is also visible in the agenda and declarations of the Second Russia–Africa Summit (2023) [Kremlin, 2023]. and often precedes broader political or economic interaction.

The economic dimension of Russia's Global South strategy is more constrained and sector-specific. Energy cooperation, nuclear technology projects, and resource extraction constitute the main areas of economic engagement. In the nuclear sphere, multiple cooperation agreements between Russia (Rosatom) and African states have been documented in recent years [World Nuclear Industry Status Report (WNISR), 2024]. Unlike China, Russia rarely offers large-scale development financing or infrastructure investment, relying instead on targeted projects aligned with its strategic industries.

Overall, Russia's approach in the Global South can be described as politically and security-oriented, adaptive, and relatively low-cost. Its strengths lie in flexibility and the ability to operate in complex political environments, while its limitations stem from restricted economic capacity and the absence of a comprehensive development framework comparable to that of China.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of Chinese and Russian approaches in the Global South reveals both converging principles and significant structural differences. At the rhetorical level, both states emphasize support for multipolarity, respect for sovereignty, and opposition to external political conditionality. These shared positions enhance their attractiveness among governments seeking alternatives to Western-led development and governance models.

Despite these similarities, the empirical evidence demonstrates fundamentally different strategic logics. China's approach is characterized by scale, institutionalization, and long-term economic integration. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Development Initiative, China embeds its engagement within structured policy frameworks that combine infrastructure development, trade expansion, and financial mechanisms [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021; State Council Information Office, 2023]. This model allows Beijing to exert sustained influence while aligning its interests with national development agendas of partner countries.

Russia's strategy, by contrast, is shaped by selectivity and functional specialization. Political dialogue and security cooperation form the backbone of its engagement, particularly in regions

experiencing instability or external pressure. Arms transfers, military training, and diplomatic support enable Russia to establish influence rapidly and at relatively low financial cost [Kremlin, 2023; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2024]. However, the limited scope of economic instruments constrains Russia's ability to compete with China in long-term development-oriented partnerships.

From the perspective of the Global South, these divergent approaches generate both opportunities and risks. China offers access to capital, infrastructure, and markets, but raises concerns related to debt sustainability and asymmetric economic dependence. Russia provides political and security alternatives that may enhance regime stability, yet lacks the resources necessary to support broad-based socioeconomic development. Consequently, many Global South states pursue diversified strategies, selectively engaging with both actors to maximize benefits and reduce dependence.

Overall, the findings suggest that China and Russia are not direct competitors across all dimensions of engagement in the Global South. Instead, their strategies often operate in parallel or complementarily, reflecting differences in capabilities, strategic cultures, and foreign policy priorities. These patterns are likely to persist in the medium term and will continue to shape the evolving role of non-Western powers in global politics.

Conclusion

This article has compared the strategic and policy approaches of China and Russia toward the Global South in the context of ongoing transformations of the international system. The analysis shows that, despite shared rhetorical commitments to multipolarity and sovereignty, the two countries rely on distinct models of engagement shaped by different resources, strategic cultures, and foreign policy priorities.

China's approach is primarily development-oriented and institutionalized, emphasizing long-term economic integration and structured cooperation frameworks. Russia's strategy is more selective and focused on political dialogue and security cooperation, enabling flexible engagement in complex regional environments. These approaches are often complementary rather than directly competitive, allowing Global South states to diversify external partnerships.

Overall, the growing involvement of China and Russia in the Global South reflects broader trends of global power diffusion and the increasing demand for non-Western partners. Further research may focus on regional case studies to assess the long-term implications of these engagement models for development and security in the Global South.

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Сравнительный анализ стратегических и политических подходов Китая и России в Глобальном Юге

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Аннотация

В данной статье рассматриваются и сравниваются стратегические и политические подходы Китая и России к Глобальному Югу в контексте современных трансформаций международной системы. Глобальный Юг становится все более важной ареной для соперничества великих держав, экономического сотрудничества и политического влияния, что делает анализ стратегий внешних игроков особенно актуальным. Целью данного исследования является определение ключевых целей, инструментов и приоритетов, формирующих взаимодействие Китая и России со странами Азии, Африки, Латинской Америки и Ближнего Востока. Исследование основано на сравнительном качественном анализе официальных стратегических документов, политических заявлений и аналитических материалов, касающихся внешнеполитической деятельности Китая и России в Глобальном Юге. Особое внимание уделяется экономическим, политическим аспектам и аспектам безопасности их взаимодействия, включая инициативы в области развития, дипломатические практики и механизмы сотрудничества в сфере безопасности. Результаты исследования демонстрируют, что подход Китая преимущественно характеризуется долгосрочной экономической интеграцией, инвестициями в инфраструктуру и институционализированными рамками развития, в то время как стратегия России в большей степени опирается на политический диалог, сотрудничество в сфере безопасности и гибкие двусторонние партнерства. Несмотря на общую риторику в поддержку многополярности и суверенитета, две страны используют различные модели взаимодействия с Глобальным Югом. В статье делается вывод, что эти различия отражают несовпадающие ресурсные базы, стратегические культуры и внешнеполитические приоритеты, что, в свою очередь, формирует перспективы и ограничения влияния Китая и России в Глобальном Юге. Полученные результаты способствуют более глубокому пониманию современных незападных внешнеполитических стратегий и их последствий для эволюции мирового порядка.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

Линь Хао. Сравнительный анализ стратегических и политических подходов Китая и России в Глобальном Юге // Теории и проблемы политических исследований. 2026. Том 15. № 1А. С. 67-73. DOI: 10.34670/AR.2026.74.20.010

Ключевые слова

Глобальный Юг, Китай, Россия, внешнеполитическая стратегия, сравнительный анализ, многополярность, международные отношения, развивающиеся страны.

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