

Special Issue – Contemporary Russia in International Relations – Introduction

Dossiê – Rússia Contemporânea nas Relações Internacionais – Introdução



Dossier – Rusia Contemporánea en las Relaciones Internacionales – Introducción

Daniela Vieira Secches¹
Fabiano P. Mielniczuk²

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The Russian launching of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine in February 2022 brought Russia back to the agenda of international politics. Due to the unprecedented nature of what was instantly called a “full scale invasion” or a “war of aggression” by NATO allies, the irrelevance conferred to Russia in the last decades gave place to a prominent role in world affairs. Like it or not, it seems that Russia’s continental size, abundant wealth in natural resources, military prowess and long history as a diplomatic broker are once again making the headlines of mainstream media and filling the pages of specialized journals world-wide. This is the context of this special issue of *Estudos Internacionais*.

After the end of the USSR, President Boris Yeltsin and his minister of foreign affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, strove to assure the international society that Russia had a western lineage. All in all, Russia adopted human rights discourse, defended the advantages of multilateralism, and reassured members of the “global community” that free markets were needed to guarantee political freedom. The leaders even affirmed that the communist period was a gap in the Soviet countries’ history of learning with the West.

Nonetheless, in spite of these efforts, Russia’s conciliatory discourse was not recognized by the West. The Western State’s lack of political will to solve Russia’s economic problems and continuing worries about the country’s military revival ensured that the self-image Russia was trying to sell about herself was not convincing. The consequent lack of support for Russia’s leaders resulted in social animosity against the West. Neocommunists and ultranationalists, both political groups with clear

1. Professor at the Graduate Program in International Relations of Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC Minas), Belo Horizonte – Brazil. PhD in International Relations (PUC Minas). MA in Political Sciences (Masaryk University, Czechia). BA in International Relations (PUC Minas). BA in Law (Federal University of Minas Gerais).

2. Professor at the Graduate Program in International Strategic Studies of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), Porto Alegre, Brazil. Doctor in International Relations by the Institute of International Relations (Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro). He is a research member at NEBRICS/UFRGS.

anti-western platforms, gained popular appeal. This fact forced Yeltsin to shift Russia's foreign policy. To maintain the support of Russia's constituents, the country's foreign policy in the near abroad became more assertive. This tendency was then reinforced by Yevgeny Primakov in the mid 1990's, and has persisted in Russian foreign policy since then, even despite the short honeymoon between presidents Putin and Bush after September 11th. Russia's confrontation with Georgia, in 2008, and the later annexation of Crimea in 2014 appears to only confirm this tendency.

The "emulation-confrontation" dichotomous relationship with the West needs to be qualified. Domestically, Russia passes through a process of consolidating an alternative statehood project in the new millennium. Its significant economic growth in the early 2000s, driven by oil and gas dividends, and the arrival of Vladimir Putin to power served as the starting point for a series of reforms. The growth of the Russian economy enabled relevant social policies at the beginning of Putin's government, leveraging his popular support. In the scope of security and defense, the country focused its efforts on modernizing its military arsenal, with special attention to offensive nuclear capabilities considering the deconstruction of the international nuclear deterrence architecture initiated by the United States of America (USA) in the late 1990s. The security agenda also served as a space for national reconciliation in resolving the situation in Chechnya and for promoting the concentration of powers in the central government in the face of the terrorist threat, especially after the Beslan attacks in 2004.

At the international level, the 21st century witnesses an international order under various pressures. Experiencing crises related to politics, security, economics, health and environment, contemporary international politics challenges the field of International Relations when it debates polarity, continuity and change. While US hegemony is undergoing undeniable deterioration, China's economic projection still does not seem to be a sufficient element for Beijing to take its place as the sole pole in the international system, nor does China show interest in proposing its own version of an order in total opposition to the liberal project articulated by the West in the 20th century.

The current international scenario complexity can be exemplified in the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2022. Politically, the centrality of the Eastern Ukrainian territory for Russian international insertion through access to a year-round navigable sea materializes traditional dynamics of dispute for power-generating capabilities. Moreover, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion into Eastern Europe and the deconstruction of the nuclear deterrence architecture are elements strongly present in the Russian narrative about the escalation in 2022 and reflect pressures on the distribution of power in the international order. The strategic partnership between Russia and China in recent years also illustrates pressures for potential changes in the international order and is a central element in relativizing the Kremlin's isolation. The trajectory of this friendship qualified by Vladimir Putin and by Xi Jinping as "limitless" also reflects deeper revisionist tendencies in the face of the deterioration of US hegemony.

Furthermore, the worsening of the Ukrainian crisis demonstrated effects of international economic integration that had not been felt until then, at least of this magnitude and character. Sanctions on Russia and their impact on the availability and price of a range of products shook markets around the world, especially in the early months of the conflict. In the medium and long term, it is observed that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict contributes to accelerating deglobalization movements already underway in the context of the economic-financial crisis of 2008 and the 2020 Covid-19 pandemics. Added to this, the demand for a more robust international cooperation on climate change may also be impacted by the cleavages fostered in the context of the escalation of tensions and the imposition of international sanctions.

Therefore, it is worth noting that today's International Relations scholars face a world full of paradoxes. On the one hand, we have never lived in a world in which information about international politics was so available and easily accessible. On the other, the plurality of sources and the manipulation of information place specialists in a difficult position to study phenomena whose nature is marked by the diverse political-ideological interests that constitute them. Hence, the special edition *Contemporary Russia in International Relations* aims to promote a qualified debate on the place occupied by Russia internationally. We do not wish to start here by defending the possibility of neutral scientific production. However, diversifying academic production on such a complex topic can bring to the fore relevant contributions produced from different perspectives. In this sense, mobilizing scholars from the Global South to present their views on contemporary Russia may advance alternative perspectives on the current crisis.

This special edition invited authors to incorporate two dimensions in their contributions: (1) Russian interests in light of the Kremlin's contemporary foreign policy; and (2) the context of escalating tensions in the Ukrainian crisis, in 2022. The three articles that were approved for publication share a common concern with empirical analysis and the treatment of data based on primary sources. They also support their arguments through literature reviews that consider not only the arguments of Western specialists, but also those of scholars belonging to other geographic spaces like the Global South. Regarding the theoretical and methodological foundation of the texts presented here, pluralism marks the constitution of pragmatic research designs, suitable for dealing with the complex and multifaceted phenomenon that this edition intends to problematize.

The relations between Russia and Asia are the central theme of the contribution *Sino-Russian Energy Cooperation in the Post-Cold War (2000-2021)*, written by Brazilian researchers Fernanda Albuquerque, Alexandre César Cunha Leite and Cristina Carvalho Pacheco. In their piece, they focus on the Sino-Russian relations from the energy production dimension. Energy is taken as the cornerstone of relations between Moscow and Beijing, which are deepening in a context in which both Russia and China need greater diversification of their trading partners in this field. After analyzing the possibilities and challenges that these partners face in

this sector, they suggest that these ties will last based on the reaching of long-term agreements and the construction of a support infrastructure for joint exploration and import of energetic resources.

Rafael Contreras-Luna and Natthanan Kunnamas address central elements for understanding Russia's international insertion in the contemporary international order in the article *Recalibrating Moscow's Strategies in Asia: Russia and Southeast Asia in a Multipolar World*. The authors investigate the Asian turn of Russian foreign policy with a focus on its rapprochement not only with China, but, especially, with other Southeast Asian powers. In doing so, the article is premised on the multipolar reality of the contemporary international order and problematizes the Russian position as a great power based on its increasingly strategic appropriation of the Asian world. According to the authors, the Kremlin still lacks a more comprehensive and well-established strategy in relation to the powers of Southeast Asia so that it can implement its reorientation towards the continent as a stage for its global projection.

The third article, entitled *The international political economy of the agrifood question in Russia*, reflects on the agenda of agricultural production. Food production presents itself as an important constitutive capability for state power at the international level, as can be seen from the impact that the escalation of tensions in 2022 generated on the grain and fertilizer markets, for example. Fabiano Escher, researcher affiliated with the Graduate Program in Social Sciences in Development, Agriculture and Society (CPDA), at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), analyzes topics such as agribusiness, family farming, food security and geopolitics from statistical data and qualified bibliographical review on Russian agri-food production.

The special edition *Contemporary Russia in International Relations* fulfills, then, its objective of expanding the perspective on Russian international insertion in the scholarship of International Relations, involving researchers from the Global South in problematizing the topic. Furthermore, by focusing on relations with Asia, this edition of *Revista Estudos Internacionais* discusses an extremely relevant sphere within the scope of Russia's foreign policy, which is relatively little explored by mainstream literature that tends to mostly oppose the Kremlin's actions from a western centric perspective.