

# Analyze Russia's Foreign Relations with Three Main Theories of International Relations

Yuwei Zhang

Department of English, University of International Relations, Beijing, China

wizardzhang@uir.edu.cn

**Abstract.** With the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia's foreign relations and diplomatic strategy have become the focus of academic research. However, previous studies on Russian diplomatic relations tend to start from a single theoretical perspective. Although this approach is detailed and in-depth enough, countries do not develop diplomatic strategies from a single perspective, so it is difficult to fully explain Russia's diplomatic motives from a single perspective. This paper will analyze Russia's foreign relations, and speculate the deep needs and diplomatic logic of The Russian authorities in the Russia-Ukraine crisis from the three mainstream theories. The analysis method this paper adopted was literature review, and all papers cited were from CNKI and Google Scholar. Through the analysis and comparison, it is obvious that Russia mainly maintains the neorealist diplomatic strategy in the conflict with Ukraine. Russia aims to maintain the neutral status of Ukraine and promote the establishment of an alliance to compete with the US-led NATO countries. From the perspective of the three major theories, this paper comprehensively analyzes Russia's foreign relations, which is conducive to providing a new analytical perspective for the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine. It can rationally view the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and have a deeper understanding of the role and purpose of Russia in the conflict, so as to provide help for the settlement of the conflict.

**Keywords:** Russia, International relations, Neorealism, Neoliberalism, Constructivism.

## 1. Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has entered a new phase of hot war. Ukraine's attempt to join NATO in order to enhance its own security has obviously brought a strong sense of insecurity to Russia after receiving a positive response from NATO. As the world's fifth largest economy and the third largest military power, Russia's every move is closely linked to the world economy and is closely watched by all sectors of society. As a result, Russia's foreign relations have become a hot topic in international relations research. Russia's foreign policy and deep-rooted needs, as well as its foreign relations, are then the focus of this article. In the following discussion, the paper will attempt to analyze Russia's foreign relations through the three mainstream international relations theories of neo-realism, neo-liberalism and constructivism. And the paper will clarify the diplomatic logic of the Russian authorities, and speculate on the deeper needs and diplomatic strategies of the Russian authorities in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

In order to provide a more concrete context, let us first understand Russia's past foreign policy. Since independence, there has been a very significant change in Russia's diplomatic philosophy. From a foreign policy that was at first slanted towards the United States, it has since developed selective relations with Eurasian countries. From a multilateral diplomacy centered on Europe and a commitment to a 'Greater Europe', it has moved eastwards and sought to build a 'Greater Eurasia'. Whether initially seeking to integrate into the US-led Euro-Atlantic system, or later working to promote the concept of a "Greater Europe", or even now seeking a "Greater Eurasia" after "turning east", all reflected Russia's attempt to participate in global politics as a dominant force, in line with its ambitions as a great power since independence [1]. Overall, Russia's diplomatic philosophy has carried a strong neo-realist undertone throughout. However, beneath the neo-realist overtones, there are also constructivist, neoliberal figures. This article will analyze neo-realism, neo-liberalism and constructivism in Russia's foreign relations, taking Russia's relations with the European Union, Russia's relations with the Middle East and Russia's relations with the Brazil, Russia, India, China

and South Africa (BRICS) countries as examples. The two sides are at odds over the EU's eastward push, which Russia sees as a threat to its national security. However, Russia's energy advantage makes the cooperation between Russia and Europe develop continuously in the field of energy. The sensitive relationship between Russia and Europe, with its differences and the cooperation that must exist, is the best example of neo-realism. In turn, the Russian-Arab relations under international peace talks such as the Astana peace process and the Sochi conference, which Russia advocates, embody the idea of neo-liberalism. At the same time, within the BRICS system, Russia has adopted a constructivist approach to establishing its national identity and interests. Russia's image in foreign relations is complex and worthy of consideration.

The purpose of this paper is to explore Russia's deep needs and diplomatic logic. It will deepen our understanding of Russia's deep-seated need to take the initiative to deepen the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the diplomatic logic that Russia embodies in its response to international circles, and Russia's role in the international community. It will also help us to look at the Russia-Ukraine conflict rationally, leaving aside external influences, and to gain a deeper understanding of Russia's role and purpose in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It is also hoped that this paper will provide a new perspective on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, reduce the incorrect international perceptions of both sides and contribute to its resolution.

The main body of this paper will be divided into three parts. In the first part, the paper will review the literature on neo-realism, neo-liberalism and constructivism and list the theoretical perspectives that are useful to the paper. In the second part, the paper will explain the strengths and weaknesses of each of the three main theories and why it is important to analyze Russian foreign relations from the perspective of the three main theories rather than choosing only one theory. In the third part, the paper will apply the three major theories to analyze Russia's external relations from the perspective of Russia and the European Union, Russia and the Middle East, and Russia and the BRICS. Finally, the paper will synthesize the three theories and their cases, select the better theory and draw conclusions to explain the deeper needs and logic of the Russian side in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, the international situation is fluid and further research on the Russia-Ukraine conflict can be conducted in response to further moves made by the Russian and Ukrainian sides in the future.

## **2. Status quo of theoretical development**

### **2.1. Neorealism**

The neorealism of international politics came into being in the 1970s and was regarded as a revision and supplement to the traditional realism in the new international context. Traditional realism holds that conflicts of interest between countries are inevitable in the process of international communication and holds a pessimistic attitude towards international cooperation. On the one hand, the neorealists represented by Kenneth Waltz inherited the essence of realism. On the other hand, they also developed their own theories according to the new situation of international politics. First of all, neorealism is characterized by statism. In neorealist theory, nations are seen as a whole acting in unison. At the same time, international politics is regarded as a system structure, which is driven by the spontaneous actions of individual states, and its formation is not influenced by the will of states. Neorealism advocates in the anarchy of the international community by using the method of structure analysis of power between the national distribution. It also emphasizes the possibility of international cooperation within limits, and promotes the combination of international conflict and international cooperation. International actors in the world system can observe a certain order and rules, thus keep the whole system in a relatively stable state. Secondly, neorealism is utilitarian. The theory of neorealism emphasizes the relative benefits and aims at pursuing the unilateral interests of the country. The interaction between countries in Waltz's works presents an instrumental characteristic: that is, one country regards another country as a tool to realize national interests; international organizations are derived from the fixation of common national expectations [2-4].

## 2.2. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism originated in the 1980s from the criticism of the defects of neoliberalism in the field of international relations theory. Neoliberal theory has adopted some basic assumptions of neoliberal theory, such as sovereign state is the only important actor in international politics and anarchy in international society, although there are different understandings of these concepts and their consequences. The differences between neoliberalism and neorealism mainly focus on three major issues, and the differences between these three issues are the biggest differences between neoliberalism and neorealism. First of all, the first question is the meaning and effects of anarchy. According to neoliberals, the effect of anarchy is to create space for various modes of interaction between states. Although many problems arise as a result of this anarchy, resulting in a persistent prisoner's dilemma, even so, states are able to cooperate according to their narrow common interests. The second question is absolute versus relative gains. Neoliberalism assumes that in cooperation, the utility of partners is independent and each country is mainly concerned with its own absolute gains. It tries to expand the concept of absolute gains to find a broader theoretical basis for cooperation. The third issue is the role of the international system. Liberalism emphasizes the important role of institutions and believes that an effective international system plays an important role: First, institutions are an important cause of international stability. Second, the system can reduce transaction costs, reduce uncertainties in international relations and contribute to international cooperation. Third, institutions change preferences through domestic institutions [5-7, 8].

## 2.3. Constructivism

The constructivist theory of international relations arose in the late 1980s, and its representative figure was Alexander Winter, an American scholar. Constructivists believe that a state is a socially constructed entity shaped by international norms and influenced by changing national identities and interests, as well as being socialized by international organizations. Constructivism's theoretical interpretation of national and international systems has a strong explanatory power to the current international issues and is applicable to the analysis of a series of policies adopted by today's sovereign states. The main points of constructivism are: (1) The world is objective material, but the social world is constructed by ideas, and the power of ideas cannot be ignored. This view is also the premise of constructivism theory. Constructivism acknowledges that the essence of the world is material and the objective things cannot be changed by ideas. (2) The agent and the structure are mutually constructed. The interaction between agent and structure is actually an extension of "subjectivity". "Intersubjectivity" is a relationship in which my behavior affects you and your behavior affects me, and the interaction between us affects each other. (3) Culture is a common concept and can also construct an actor. Constructivism holds that there are three systematic cultures in international relations: Hobbes culture, Locke culture and Kantian culture. In Hobbesian culture, actors see each other as enemies; in Lockean culture, actors see each other as adversaries; in Kantian culture, actors treat each other as friends [9, 10].

## 3. Strengths and weaknesses of the three theories

### 3.1 Neorealism

The first advantage of neorealist theory is that it pursues statism. "The essence of social reality is group", the most common form of international politics is nation-state, and international conflicts, namely conflicts between nation-states, are dominant and essential. The second great virtue of neorealism is the principle of simplification. A valid international theory can only make theoretical assumptions using a few of the most important variables, and it is unrealistic to include all of them [8]. However, neorealism also has great defects, which are mainly reflected in the interpretation of history and the interpretation of the present. Historically, the transition from one flexible alliance system to two rigid alliance systems before 1914 is not a transition from multi-polarity to bipolar,

which is inconsistent with the judgment of neorealism. Neorealists believe that the state is the most important actor. However, at present, international organizations and institutions have become important non-state actors that can play an independent role. With the development of society, neorealism has gradually appeared many shortcomings, which is also that neorealism needs to be reformed [11, 12].

### **3.2 Neoliberalism**

The advantages of neoliberal theory can be divided into two aspects: theory and practice. Theoretically, the neoliberal theory of state rationality and interdependence really reflects the current international social situation. It has also absorbed emerging research methods such as game theory and rational choice, making its theoretical analysis more rigorous and practical. In practice, neoliberalism adapts to the changes in international social, economic and political conditions, promotes the process of globalization and international cooperation, and helps to remedy the theoretical defects of realism [7]. However, neoliberalism underestimates the existential concerns and constraints that are a necessary consequence of international anarchy. More importantly, the neoliberal preference for absolute benefits makes it easy to ignore the weight and status of relative benefits in national decision-making. In fact, the policy goal of many countries is not to maximize gains, but instead to try to prevent others from gaining more, even at the cost of some gains. Moreover, the theory of international mechanism put forward by neoliberalism does not mention how international mechanism is formed. This leads to the problem that the theory cannot explain exactly how or where mechanisms play a positive role [13].

### **3.3 Constructivism**

The value of constructivism can be divided into theoretical value and practical value. From the perspective of theoretical value, constructivist international relations theory overturns the logical starting point of traditional international relations theory. It helps us to grasp the essence of anarchy and its development direction. Secondly, Winter draws on a large number of sociological and psychological categories, breaking the traditional approach of preferring economics in the field of international relations theoretical research. It also promotes the penetration of various disciplines and opens up a new theoretical horizon for international relations research. From the perspective of practical value, constructivism international relations theory is conducive to strengthening and promoting international cooperation and exchanges. It lays a theoretical foundation for establishing a fair, reasonable and mutually beneficial international new order [14, 15]. However, the constructivism theory of international relations has obvious deficiencies and defects. First, constructivists see that there are many convenient conditions for states to know each other's intentions, so they draw the general conclusion that states can grasp each other's intentions, which is obviously an empirical approach. Second, constructivism ignores the complexity of social relations, especially the underestimation of possible deception between countries. In the reality of international politics, countries intent on deception can try to create a facade to serve their own narrow objectives [15].

## **4. Russian foreign relations from the perspective of three theories**

### **4.1 Russian-European relations from a neo-realist perspective**

For decades, Europe has generally been recognized as an important partner for Russia because cooperation with the EU has significant political and economic implications for Russia. However, relations have cooled over NATO expansion, with European countries objecting to Russia blocking eastern European countries from joining the alliance. At the same time, with the continuous increase of EU member states and the deepening of the extension of the EU to the east, Russia's opposition and resistance to Europe are becoming more and more intense. The contradictions and differences between Russia and Europe on the two key issues of NATO eastward expansion and EU eastward

promotion have led to the development of Russia-EU relations becoming not so smooth. On the whole, Russia-Eu relations show a slow development trend in the collision [16].

From the perspective of neorealism, the two key problems between Russia and Europe are typical security dilemma models. It is well known that Ukraine has been seeking membership in NATO and the European Union since 2015. From the perspective of the Ukrainian government, joining the EU can eliminate the trade barriers between Ukraine and EU countries, which is conducive to maintaining the economic security of Ukraine. Similarly, joining NATO could deepen military cooperation with NATO countries and safeguard Ukraine's military security. After Ukraine joins NATO and the European Union, however, the two groups of spheres of influence will directly border with Russia. This poses a challenge to Russia's strategy and security and exacerbates Russia's sense of insecurity, which is why Russia is firmly opposed to Ukraine joining NATO and the European Union. This is also one of the reasons for the conflict with Ukraine [17]. However, although there are frictions between Russia and Europe in terms of geostrategic expansion, the relationship between Russia and Europe has maintained a trend of forward development due to the needs of interest realization. The energy consumption of the EU accounts for about 15% of the world's total energy consumption, half of which depends on imports. The natural gas and oil from Russia account for 50% and 30% of the total imports respectively. This shows that energy issues closely link Russia and the EU, and the two sides have a good basis for docking and interaction. As a whole, Russia-EU relations can maintain a relatively stable development. Although there are contradictions in the cooperation between Russia and Europe, from the perspective of theoretical analysis of neorealism, both sides must be in the contradictory unity of conflict and cooperation in order to achieve their own interests and strategic goals [16].

#### **4.2 Russian-Arab relations from a neoliberal perspective**

Russia's relations with countries in the Middle East have roughly gone through two phases -- before and after the Arab Spring. Before the outbreak of the "Arab Spring", Russia made efforts and attempts in two aspects in order to realize its strategic goal of returning to the Middle East and re-shaping the image of a world power. On the one hand, Russia coordinates relations with western countries, especially the United States. On the other hand, Russia has strengthened cooperation with several Middle Eastern countries on the basis of bilateral relations. The core of Russia's Middle East policy is to ensure Russia's geopolitical and energy security [18]. However, Russia lacks a comprehensive diplomatic framework for the Middle East, mistakenly assuming that the region has a relatively stable political and economic system. It has also taken a huge toll on Russian interests in the Middle East, even more so than those of other countries outside the region.

After the impact of the Arab Spring on Russia's interests in the Middle East, the importance of the Middle East in Russian diplomacy has been elevated by the Russian government's reanalysis of the region's strategic significance to Russia. Intervention in the Syrian crisis is one of Russia's major actions to improve the diplomatic surrounding environment and safeguard its strategic interests in the Middle East after the conflict in Ukraine. By intervening militarily in the Syrian crisis, Russia has broken through its passivity since the conflict in Ukraine and become the dominant player in geopolitics and regional security issues in the Middle East. Such unilateral action, in large part to ensure more multilateralism, gives the Middle East the possibility of a more equitable and less ideological multilateralism [19, 20].

Since then, Russia has participated actively in the resolution of the political problems in the Middle East, taken a lot of diplomatic initiatives, and actively advocates establishing a system for Middle East political cooperation. It also takes the initiative to lead and to shape the Syrian crisis era of peace process, initiated and led such as "Astana talks" "Sochi meeting" political talks. In this process, Russia has made full use of the role of international organizations and multilateral mechanisms to actively expand in-depth cooperation and strengthen partnership with Middle Eastern countries. On the whole, after the Arab Spring, Russia's diplomatic strategy in the Middle East has embodied a distinct theoretical guidance of neoliberalism [19].

### 4.3 Russia-BRICS relations in a constructivist perspective

In 2013, Putin signed and confirmed the Concept of the Russian Federation joining the BRICS Mechanism [21]. Russia's BRICS Concept points out that cooperation within the framework of BRICS mechanism is Russia's key long-term foreign policy. From the perspective of constructivism, the strategic purpose of the concept can be summarized into five aspects: national interest, international norms, role identity, collective identity and cultural identity.

Winter defined the national interest as the survival, independence, economic wealth and collective self-esteem of the state-society complex [22]. To maintain the country's survival and independence, Russia must develop its economy, accumulate wealth and become an economic power. The economies of BRICS countries are highly complementary, and economic and trade cooperation with BRICS countries can effectively enhance Russia's economic wealth. This is why Russia attaches great importance to economic and trade cooperation with BRICS countries [8].

Winter regards identity as an attribute of an intentional agent. Identity consists of two concepts: self-possession and other-possession, constructed from internal and external structures [22]. Russia has long been eager to get equal status with Europe and the United States and play its mission as a great power in a new international norm. However, the mismatch between Russia's military power and its economic might has long kept it subdued by the West. This leads to the lack of external construction of Russia's role identity. Therefore, Russia needs to make use of the collective identity formed by the BRICS mechanism to perfect the external construction of Russia's role identity.

Winter pointed out that the common knowledge of society is culture, and culture has an effect on identity and interests, which depend on discourse formation and material power [22]. Therefore, in order to realize culture identity and collective identity, Russia must not only enhance its material strength, but also expand the influence of Russia's cultural concept in BRICS countries and the entire international community. Therefore, Russia is committed to establishing an interaction mechanism among member states in the field of tourism, so as to expand the spread of Russian language, culture and information among major countries in the world, including BRICS countries.

## 5. Conclusion

Neo-realism, characterized by nationalism and utilitarianism, emphasizes the balance of power in international politics and questions or denies the role of the international system. Neoliberalism, characterized by interdependence and institutionalism, emphasizes the feasibility of cooperation through international institutions and organizations in international anarchy. Constructivism, with the identity of actors as its core, emphasizes the influence of identity and norms on state behavior. However, nowadays, non-state actors are playing more and more important roles in international politics, which makes the neo-realism theory of nationalism difficult to sustain. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on absolute gains, is at odds with the status quo of international politics, in which countries often seek to impede the gains of others. Constructivism often has the problem of empiricism and underestimates the complexity of international social relations. All in all, the three theories of international relations have significant shortcomings and need to be improved.

Finally, let's return to the core issue of this paper -- the deep needs and logic of Russia in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This paper argues that neorealism is the most suitable theory to explain the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine are caught in a classic security dilemma -- Ukraine's pursuit of its own economic and military security threatens Russia's strategy and security. Therefore, Russia's first deep need in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is to maintain Ukraine's neutral status. Russia needs to ensure that there is a buffer belt between Russia and NATO to prevent NATO's military forces from directly surrounding Russia, and Ukraine bordering Russia is obviously the best choice for the buffer zone. Second, Russia wants to use the conflict with Ukraine to promote the confrontation of international power -- by escalating tensions with NATO to promote alliances with countries that do not want to see the US-led alliance as a dominant force. Through this slightly coercive alliance, in which each country seemed to have to take sides or become a common enemy,

Russia sought to create a bloc of forces to rival the US-led NATO. Judging from the current trend of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia seems to have partially achieved its goal, but whether Russia's gains are greater than its efforts, and whether Russia can really establish a balanced international power situation remains to be seen.

## References

- [1] Lu ping. 30 years of Russian foreign policy evolution [J]. *Journal of Russian Studies*, 2021, 11 (06): 38-58.
- [2] Xiong Qian. Changes and Prospects of the Current International System under the View of Neo-realism's International Cooperation Theory [J]. *Chongqing and the World (Academic Edition)*, 2013, 30 (07): 35-36+45.
- [3] Jiao Bing. *New Realism and Appraisal on It: in the Perspective of Philosophy of Science* [D]. Central China Normal University, 2006.
- [4] Li Jieyu. Rationality and Deficiency of Woltz School of Neorealism -- Also comment on Poverty of Neorealism [J]. *Journal of Tianjin institute of administration*, 2012, 14 (04): 32-37.
- [5] Zhu Lumin, Zhou Guanwen. From Disputation to Integration: Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate [J]. *Journal of Harbin Institute of Technology (social science edition)*, 2007 (4): 57 to 60.
- [6] Powell R. Anarchy in international relations theory: the neorealist-neoliberal debate[J]. *International organization*, 1994, 48 (2): 313-344.
- [7] Guo Feng. Understanding Neoliberalism in Comparison with Neorealism [J]. *Journal of the University of International Relations*, 2002 (05): 8-12.
- [8] Robert O K. *New Realism and Its Criticism* [M]. Peking University Press. 2002: 180-181
- [9] Liu Chunjie. Russia's Interest in BRICS Mechanism: A Constructivist Perspective [J]. *Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies*, 2016 (04): 28-40+156.
- [10] Utzig S M. What is the Mainspring of the BRICS? A Constructivist Analysis [J].
- [11] Nye J S. Neorealism and neoliberalism [J]. *World politics*, 1988, 40 (2): 235-251.
- [12] Guo Shuyong. A Milestone in the History of Theoretical Criticism of Contemporary International Relations -- Comment on *New Realism and Its Criticism* edited by Keohan [J]. *American Research*, 2003 (01): 137-148.
- [13] Kim H Z. Theory of International Cooperation—Debate between Neorealism and Neoliberalism [J]. *International Forum*, 2004 (05): 1-6+79.
- [14] Gong Baisong. Contemporary Value of Constructivism International Relations Theory [J]. *Journal of Jiangnan petroleum workers university*, 2014, 27 (06): 68-70.
- [15] Wang Gonglong. Contribution and Deficiency of Winter's Constructivism theory [J]. *World Economics and Politics*, 2002 (05): 34-39.
- [16] Zheng Ailong, Sui Junyu. An analysis of Russia-Europe relations from the perspective of neo-realism [J]. *Academic forum*, 2015, 38 (08): 52-55.
- [17] Zaslavskaya N. EU-Russia relations: a theoretical interpretation of Russia's perception of the European Union [J]. *Studia Politologiczne*, 2020, 56 (56): 195-212.
- [18] Federation of American Scientists. *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*. June 28. 2000. <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.html>
- [19] Meng Jun. Arab Spring and Russian Diplomatic Strategies Towards the Middle East [J]. *Arab World Studies*, 2021 (03): 32-49+158.
- [20] Stepanova E. Russia in the Middle East: Back to a “Grand Strategy” or Enforcing Multilateralism [J]. *Politique étrangère*, 2016, 2: 1-14.
- [21] Концепция участия Российской Федерации в объединении БРИКС. February 9. 2013. <http://news.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d452a8a232b2f6f8a5.pdf>
- [22] Wendt A. *Social theory of international politics* [M]. Cambridge University Press, 1999.