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Why Institutional Isolation Fails

UN Voting, Legal Sovereignty and Hierarchical Geopolitics in the Russia Case

Despite the overwhelming condemnation of the Russian Federation in the United Nations General Assembly following the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, international efforts aimed at isolating Russia have produced limited tangible geopolitical effects. While formal voting patterns suggest broad institutional isolation, Russia has retained significant political, economic and strategic support from major powers such as China and India, as well as from a substantial proportion of states in Africa and the Global South.

This paper addresses the apparent paradox between institutional isolation and geopolitical resilience by distinguishing between legal sovereignty and effective geopolitical position. The argument advanced is that the UN General Assembly operates on the principle of formal legal equality, where each state possesses one vote, while the geopolitical sphere is structured hierarchically, reflecting asymmetric power relations, network dependencies and resource-based influence.

Building on the analysis of UN voting behaviour and patterns of diplomatic alignment, the paper demonstrates that institutional isolation does not automatically translate into geopolitical insulation. Instead, isolation efforts are constrained by hierarchical support structures in the international system, where major powers and strategically positioned states can mitigate or neutralise the effects of institutional condemnation.

By introducing the conceptual distinction between institutional isolation and geopolitical insulation, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary sanction regimes and diplomatic pressure mechanisms. The findings have direct implications for security studies, sanctions policy and strategic planning, highlighting the limits of institution-based approaches in a hierarchically structured international order.

Keywords: legal sovereignty, institutional isolation, geopolitical insulation, institutionalised hierarchy, geopolitical network

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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war in 2022, the international community has employed a broad range of diplomatic and economic instruments aimed at isolating the Russian Federation. One of the most visible manifestations of this effort has been the repeated condemnation of Russia in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), where an overwhelming majority of member states have supported resolutions criticising Russian actions and reaffirming core principles of international law.²

At first glance, these voting outcomes appear to indicate a high degree of international consensus and, by extension, the successful institutional isolation of Russia. However, this interpretation becomes problematic when juxtaposed with the empirical reality of continued diplomatic engagement, sustained economic relations, and strategic cooperation between Russia and a significant number of states, including major powers such as China and India, as well as a large proportion of countries in Africa and the Global South. Collectively, these states represent a substantial share of the world's population, natural resources, and economic potential.

This discrepancy gives rise to a fundamental analytical paradox: how can a state be simultaneously institutionally condemned by a majority of the international community and yet remain geopolitically resilient and connected? The persistence of Russian influence and cooperation networks challenges the assumption – often implicit in policy and academic discourse – that institutional isolation within international organisations necessarily translates into effective geopolitical isolation.³

The central argument of this paper is that this paradox can be resolved by distinguishing between two analytically distinct dimensions of isolation: *institutional isolation* and *geopolitical insulation*. While institutional isolation operates within a legal–procedural framework based on formal equality and symbolic delegitimation, geopolitical insulation depends on hierarchical power relations (Figure 1), network-based dependencies, and material capacities that lie largely outside the reach of institutional voting mechanisms.⁴

By examining UN voting behaviour alongside broader patterns of geopolitical alignment, the paper demonstrates that institutional isolation has inherent structural limits. These limits become particularly visible in cases involving major or systemically significant powers, whose hierarchical position within the international system enables them to mitigate or neutralise the effects of institutional pressure. The Russia case thus offers an instructive example for reassessing the relationship between legal sovereignty, institutional legitimacy, and effective geopolitical positioning.⁵

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the principles of legal sovereignty and institutional equality that underpin the functioning of the United Nations system. This is followed by an examination of the conceptual and empirical limits of institutional isolation as a tool of international pressure. Subsequent sections develop a hierarchical interpretation of geopolitical space to explain why institutional condemnation often

² United Nations General Assembly 2022a; United Nations General Assembly 2022b.

³ HURRELL 2007.

⁴ IKENBERRY 2011.

⁵ LAKE 2009.

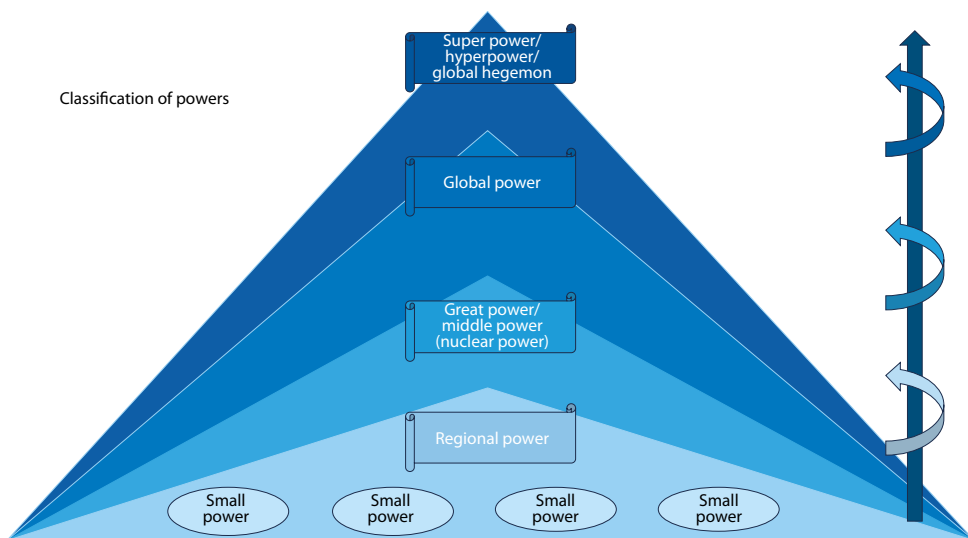


Figure 1: Ranking of powers by their ability to influence

Source: ANDRÉKÓ 2025: 153

fails to produce the intended strategic outcomes. The concluding section reflects on the implications of this analysis for security studies, sanctions policy, and strategic planning.

Legal sovereignty and institutional equality in the United Nations

The United Nations system is founded on the principle of the sovereign equality of states, as enshrined in Article 2(1) of the UN Charter. This principle constitutes the legal and normative cornerstone of the organisation and is operationalised most visibly in the United Nations General Assembly, where each member state possesses one vote regardless of its size, power, or level of development. From a legal perspective, this arrangement reflects a commitment to formal equality and the universality of international law.⁶

Within this institutional framework, UN General Assembly resolutions function primarily as expressions of collective political judgment and normative positioning. Although such resolutions lack binding force, they carry symbolic weight by signalling the degree of international support or opposition toward a particular state's actions. In this sense, institutional isolation manifests as a form of delegitimation, intended to stigmatise behaviour that is perceived as violating international norms.⁷

However, the legal equality embedded in the UNGA voting system also imposes important analytical constraints. By design, the system abstracts from material power

⁶ United Nations 1945.

⁷ HURRELL 2007.

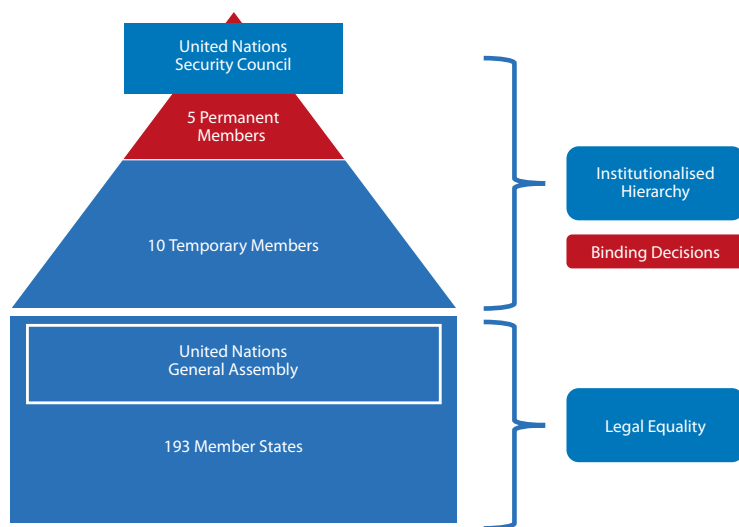


Figure 2: Legal equality vs. institutionalised hierarchy

Source: compiled by the author

differentials and treats all states as formally equivalent actors. This abstraction, while normatively significant, limits the capacity of UN voting outcomes to capture the actual distribution of power and influence in the international system. As a result, institutional isolation measured through voting behaviour may provide an incomplete or even misleading picture of a state's effective geopolitical position.⁸

This limitation becomes particularly evident when considering the distinction between the UN General Assembly and other components of the UN system, most notably the Security Council. Unlike the General Assembly, the Security Council explicitly institutionalises hierarchy through permanent membership and veto power (Figure 2). The coexistence of these two bodies reflects a fundamental tension within the international order: the aspiration toward legal equality on the one hand, and the recognition of hierarchical power relations on the other.⁹

In the context of international isolation strategies, this tension has significant implications. Institutional condemnation in the General Assembly may signal broad normative disapproval, but it does not automatically translate into enforceable constraints or coordinated action. Enforcement mechanisms – such as sanctions regimes, trade restrictions, or diplomatic downgrades – depend on the willingness and capacity of states to implement them. These capacities are unevenly distributed and closely tied to hierarchical positioning within global economic, political, and security networks.

Consequently, institutional isolation should not be understood as a binary condition in which a state is either isolated or not isolated. Rather, it constitutes a spectrum of symbolic and procedural exclusion that interacts with, but does not determine, a state's material

⁸ LAKE 2009.

⁹ IKENBERRY 2011.

and strategic environment. In cases where a targeted state retains access to alternative markets, strategic partners, or major power backing, institutional isolation may coexist with continued geopolitical engagement.¹⁰

The Russia case illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. Despite repeated condemnations in the UN General Assembly, Russia has maintained substantial economic ties, diplomatic channels, and strategic partnerships beyond the Western institutional sphere. This outcome suggests that legal sovereignty and institutional equality, while central to the normative architecture of the international system, do not fully account for the mechanisms through which power, influence, and resilience are exercised in practice.¹¹

Empirical evidence: The limits of institutional isolation in the Russia case

From a policy perspective, the effectiveness of international isolation strategies is commonly assessed through institutional indicators, most notably voting behaviour in international organisations and formal participation in sanction regimes. In the case of the Russian Federation, United Nations General Assembly voting records appear to provide strong evidence of widespread international opposition since 2022. A clear majority of UN member states have repeatedly supported resolutions condemning Russian actions and reaffirming principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty.¹²

However, when these institutional indicators are compared with patterns of actual political, economic, and strategic interaction, a significant discrepancy emerges (Figure 3). Despite formal condemnation, Russia has not experienced comprehensive geopolitical isolation. Instead, it has retained – and in some cases expanded – cooperation with a range of strategically significant actors. This divergence highlights the need to distinguish between symbolic institutional alignment and effective geopolitical behaviour.¹³

Several empirical patterns are particularly relevant. First, a number of major and emerging powers have consistently refrained from supporting or enforcing isolation measures beyond the institutional level. China and India, while adopting cautious diplomatic rhetoric, have maintained extensive economic relations with Russia, particularly in the fields of energy, trade, and strategic cooperation. These relationships have provided Russia with alternative markets and revenue streams, mitigating the impact of Western-led sanctions.¹⁴ Second, a substantial proportion of states in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia have avoided full alignment with isolation efforts. Many of these states abstained from UN General Assembly votes or supported resolutions rhetorically while continuing pragmatic engagement with Russia. Collectively, these regions represent a large share of the global population and control significant natural resources, transit routes, and emerging markets.

¹⁰ BALDWIN 1985.

¹¹ LAKE 2009; HURRELL 2007.

¹² United Nations General Assembly 2022a; 2022b.

¹³ DREZNER 2011.

¹⁴ FARRELL-NEWMAN 2019.

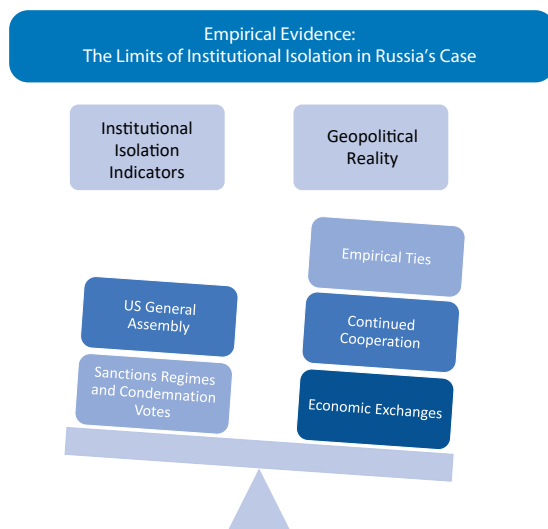


Figure 3: Institutional isolation and geopolitical reality

Source: compiled by the author

From a policy standpoint, this pattern undermines the assumption that numerical majority in institutional voting equates to strategic leverage.¹⁵

Third, the implementation of isolation measures has varied considerably across regions and policy domains. While certain financial and technological restrictions have imposed real costs, enforcement gaps and selective compliance have limited their overall effectiveness. The persistence of trade flows through third countries, the reorientation of supply chains, and the development of alternative payment mechanisms illustrate how geopolitical connectivity can be reconfigured rather than severed.¹⁶ Taken together, these observations suggest that institutional isolation operates primarily at the level of political signalling and normative positioning. It shapes reputational environments and diplomatic narratives, but it does not automatically disrupt the underlying networks that sustain a state's geopolitical resilience. For policymakers, this implies that institutional condemnation alone is an insufficient indicator of strategic isolation, particularly when dealing with systemically significant actors.

Explaining the paradox: Hierarchical geopolitics and policy constraints

To understand why institutional isolation has failed to produce comprehensive geopolitical isolation in the Russia case, it is necessary to move beyond a purely institutional or legal

¹⁵ NARLIKAR 2013.

¹⁶ DREZNER 2011; FARRELL-NEWMAN 2019.

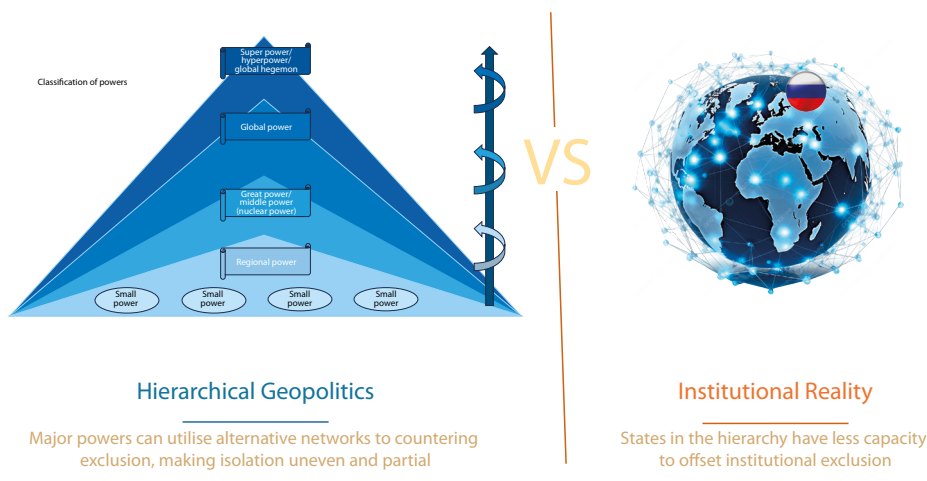


Figure 4: Hierarchical geopolitics and the geopolitical network

Source: compiled by the author

framework and consider the hierarchical structure of the international system. From a policy-analytic perspective, the key limitation of institution-centred approaches lies in their implicit assumption of horizontal state relations, where formal rules and collective decisions are expected to generate uniform effects.¹⁷

In practice, the international system is characterised by hierarchical differentiation. States occupy unequal positions based on their material capabilities, network centrality, and strategic relevance. These hierarchies shape the range of options available to both those seeking to impose isolation and those attempting to resist it. Major powers and systemically connected states are less vulnerable to institutional pressure because they possess alternative channels for economic exchange, diplomatic engagement, and security cooperation.¹⁸

Within this hierarchical context, isolation functions differently depending on a state's position. For actors situated lower in the hierarchy, institutional condemnation may coincide with tangible constraints, as they lack the capacity to compensate for lost access to markets, technologies, or security guarantees (Figure 4). By contrast, states occupying higher or more central positions can leverage their network connections to offset institutional exclusion. In such cases, isolation becomes partial, selective, and uneven.¹⁹

From a policy standpoint, this distinction is crucial. Institutional mechanisms such as UN resolutions are most effective when they align with existing power hierarchies and network structures. When they do not, their impact is largely symbolic. The Russia case demonstrates that even extensive institutional condemnation may fail to generate decisive strategic effects if alternative geopolitical alignments remain available.²⁰

¹⁷ LAKE 2009.

¹⁸ LAKE 2009; IKENBERRY 2011.

¹⁹ FARRELL-NEWMAN 2019.

²⁰ HURRELL 2007.

This dynamic can be conceptualised as the difference between *institutional isolation* and *geopolitical insulation*. Institutional isolation refers to formal exclusion or condemnation within international organisations and legal–normative frameworks. Geopolitical insulation, by contrast, refers to a state’s capacity to shield itself from the practical consequences of isolation through hierarchical support, resource control, and network-based resilience.

For security and foreign policy planners, this distinction carries important implications. Overreliance on institutional indicators may lead to overestimation of isolation effectiveness and underestimation of a target state’s adaptive capacity. Effective isolation strategies must therefore account for hierarchical positioning, identify critical network nodes, and assess the availability of alternative partnerships. Without such an assessment, isolation risks becoming a declaratory policy instrument rather than a tool of strategic influence.²¹

Implications for sanctions design, alliance management and risk assessment

The distinction between institutional isolation and geopolitical insulation has direct and practical implications for contemporary security policy. In particular, it challenges prevailing assumptions regarding sanctions effectiveness, alliance cohesion, and strategic risk assessment. Policymakers who rely predominantly on institutional indicators may misjudge both the resilience of targeted states and the durability of international pressure coalitions.

Sanctions design: From declaratory measures to network disruption

Sanctions regimes are often constructed on the implicit assumption that institutional condemnation and coordinated legal restrictions will generate cumulative economic and political pressure. While such measures can impose significant costs, the Russia case demonstrates that the effectiveness of sanctions is highly contingent on the hierarchical position and network embeddedness of the targeted state.

For systemically connected actors, sanctions tend to trigger adaptive behaviour rather than isolation. Alternative trade routes, substitute markets, and parallel financial mechanisms can reduce vulnerability and redistribute costs across the network. From a policy perspective, this suggests that sanctions design should move beyond broad-based restrictions toward more targeted interventions aimed at critical nodes within geopolitical and economic networks.

Effective sanctions strategies require granular mapping of dependencies, including energy flows, technological bottlenecks, logistics corridors, and financial intermediaries. Rather than assuming uniform compliance, policymakers must anticipate selective enforcement and design measures that account for differential incentives among third-party

²¹ LAKE 2009.

states. In hierarchical systems, sanctions are most effective when they disrupt high-value connections rather than merely signal disapproval.²²

Alliance management: Managing asymmetry and divergent incentives

Institutional coalitions, particularly those formed around multilateral organisations, often mask underlying divergences in strategic priorities and threat perceptions. The Russia case illustrates how alliance cohesion at the institutional level may coexist with significant variation in actual policy implementation.

From an alliance management perspective, the key challenge lies in reconciling formal unity with asymmetric costs and benefits. States occupying different positions within the geopolitical hierarchy face distinct exposure levels to economic retaliation, energy disruptions, or security risks. As a result, institutional alignment does not necessarily imply uniform commitment to sustained isolation efforts.

Effective alliance management therefore requires proactive coordination mechanisms that address these asymmetries explicitly. This includes burden-sharing arrangements, compensatory measures, and differentiated timelines that reflect partners' structural constraints. Failure to acknowledge hierarchical differences within alliances risks erosion of compliance and gradual fragmentation of collective strategies.²³

Risk assessment: Rethinking isolation as a strategic variable

Traditional risk assessments often treat isolation as a binary condition: a state is either isolated or not. The findings presented in this paper suggest that such an approach is analytically insufficient and potentially misleading for security planning.

A more robust risk assessment framework should conceptualise isolation as a multidimensional variable influenced by legal status, network connectivity, and hierarchical positioning. Analysts should assess not only the presence of institutional condemnation but also the availability of alternative alignments, the resilience of supply chains, and the capacity for strategic substitution.

In practical terms, this means that policymakers should be cautious in extrapolating long-term outcomes from short-term institutional signals. The persistence of geopolitical insulation may enable targeted states to prolong conflicts, absorb economic shocks, or exploit divisions within pressure coalitions. Incorporating hierarchical analysis into risk assessments can therefore improve strategic foresight and reduce the likelihood of policy overconfidence.²⁴

²² BALDWIN 1985; DREZNER 2011.

²³ IKENBERRY 2011; NARLIKAR 2013.

²⁴ FARRELL-NEWMAN 2019; LAKE 2009.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the apparent paradox between widespread institutional condemnation and limited geopolitical isolation in the case of the Russian Federation. By distinguishing between institutional isolation and geopolitical insulation, the analysis demonstrates that formal legal equality and institutional voting outcomes provide an incomplete picture of power, influence, and resilience in the international system.

The findings suggest that institutional mechanisms, while normatively significant and politically visible, operate primarily at the level of legitimacy signalling. Their strategic impact is constrained by hierarchical structures that shape access to resources, networks, and alternative partnerships. In such a context, isolation strategies that rely predominantly on institutional alignment risk overestimating their effectiveness, particularly when applied to systemically significant actors.

For security studies and policy practice, the implications are clear. Sanctions design must focus on disrupting critical network nodes rather than assuming uniform compliance. Alliance management should explicitly address asymmetries in exposure and incentives among partners. Risk assessment frameworks must move beyond binary conceptions of isolation and incorporate hierarchical positioning as a core analytical variable.

More broadly, the Russia case underscores the need to rethink how sovereignty, isolation, and power are conceptualised in contemporary international relations. Legal sovereignty remains a foundational principle of the international order, but its practical significance is mediated by hierarchical dynamics that determine which actors can absorb pressure and which cannot. Recognising this distinction is essential for developing more realistic and effective security strategies in an increasingly fragmented and stratified global system.

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