

The Bear's New Strategy

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The National Security Strategy, approved by President Vladimir Putin's decree of July 2, 2021, is the main document defining the general goals and objectives of Russia's development in the current international situation. Although the country, as the Strategy states, has a favorable geographical position, the document is defensive in content with regard to the most important external challenges and threats. In this sense, the Strategy continues the Russian foreign policy tradition that considers the ability to protect the demographic and resource base of the state to be the most important development task.

With competition between countries becoming the most common interpretation of the current state of international politics, Russia does not pursue the goal of sharing anything with other leading

world powers or forcing them out of their positions. This is exactly what China and the United States are doing, though, regarding their own development and the spread of their influence as inseparable tasks. In terms of its geographical size, resource availability and the structure of export, which is so important for national sustainability, Russia does not need to manage the international order. At the same time, and we can see this in the new Strategy, it demands respect for its own understanding of justice not only at the domestic but also at the international levels and insists that it has sufficient power to ensure that.

Moscow seeks to make decisions not by setting grand and ambitious goals, but by assessing the situation in the world, and indicates how it intends to block emerging threats or use less numerous opportunities. This includes military security, the economy and, to a large extent, problems arising in the information and communication or ideological space. It is noteworthy that like most of Russia's recent documents of this level, the Strategy places key emphases not in order to soften its rhetoric diplomatically, but in order to clearly state the true essence of the problems. The reason for this most probably is the absence of any practical need to maintain the semblance of a positive agenda with external partners. There is no need to do this with China, India or Russia's allies in the EAEU and the CSTO because there are no problems the resolution of which would have to be substituted by empty talking. Likewise, there is no need for positive rhetoric with Western countries since relations with them have become fairly clear and predictable.

In general, what makes this Strategy so distinct is the analytical approach to the state of international politics and the world economy. This part of the Strategy was probably the result of serious work and interested its authors the most. The Strategy focuses on analyzing the situation around Russia rather than on setting audacious tasks, which is not quite characteristic of such documents. If such tasks are set, they are focused on supporting UN institutions and international law traditionally important for Moscow, or on promoting initiatives that have been put forward for several years as part of Russia's foreign

policy measures, such as cooperation between the countries of Greater Eurasia.

The document is based on the premise that over the past twenty years the Russian state has built sufficient internal reserves to ensure its own stability. The central point is the ability, noted in the Strategy, to withstand Western sanctions that have been imposed in various ways for the past seven years. At the same time, Russia does not need to expand or run a race with other powers. On the contrary, it closely monitors their actions with a view to ensuring the security of its own internal and external borders.

These borders include particularly “the taiga of the Russian bear” President Putin has once mentioned in one of his speeches. In principle, the Strategy focuses on internal development as a critical factor of vulnerability or invulnerability to external threats. This is fairly true as the Russian state has never experienced existential problems over the past five hundred years due to external pressure. But internal difficulties led to its actual collapse three times: once at the beginning of the 17th century and twice in the 20th century. This is why the Strategy addresses internal problems with utmost seriousness, while dealing with external ones from the perspective of an observer. Naturally, these observations serve as the basis for decisions concerning external challenges that need to be taken most seriously.

This is why a separate important section in the Strategy—assessing the situation and setting tasks—concerns intangible issues such as cultural and ideological consequences of global tension. Obviously, Russia pays great attention to this issue, much more so than, for example, China. This is not surprising: as a country of great European civilization, Russia inevitably falls under the influence of cultural processes that take place in the West. It is extremely vulnerable to the most typical manifestations of the “cultural revolution”—they are detailed in the Strategy—which run counter to Russian culture and traditions. But even if they had a basis in Russian society, impulses for radical change still come from the West. And so by giving in to them, Russia will inevitably end up following Western policies designed to obtain unilateral benefits.

The Strategy seriously addresses the challenge posed by the ideological struggle being waged against Russia by its Western partners. The recognition that such a struggle is underway and has a wide variety of forms, as the Strategy approved by the president clearly indicates, is a result all by itself. In fact, continuing to pretend that the discussions taking place in Europe or the U.S. on the history of World War II or the abandonment of the binary gender system are nothing important would be simply dangerous. Unfortunately, we do not live in the 18th-19th centuries and nowadays questions regarding the choice of an individual are becoming an instrument of power struggle.

For the first time in the history of such programmatic documents in Russia, the Strategy does not mention the role of interaction with the United States and its allies in Europe. The previous Strategy 2015 contained a separate paragraph on how to build a partnership with Washington where the interests of the two countries coincided. Now the factor of Western participation in world affairs and its policy towards Russia is considered only through the consequences of their negative impact on global affairs. The Strategy points out that the West is seeking to maintain its monopoly position and shaking all institutions and practices that prevent it from doing so, including the UN system and international law, Russia's commitment to which is reiterated in the Strategy.

One can hardly expect cooperation with the United States or Europe to help Russia solve its problems and this should have been stated clearly a long time ago. A relatively constructive meeting between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden is no reason to think that something can change in the nature of Russian-American relations. Europe is totally absent from the new Strategy—apparently, Moscow does not count on any constructive attitude from it. The absence in such a fundamental foreign policy document of a partner which only fifteen years ago was among the most important ones should send a clear message to Brussels and leading European capitals.

Europe, like the West in general, is not a partner in solving international problems, but rather their cause. Since the Strategy

is a national document, clarity on the matter is not an obstacle to addressing individual problems with due account for the behavior of those who create them.

Therefore, the fact that the Strategy generally calls many things by their proper names can only be welcomed. In this sense, this solves one of the most important problems of international politics, namely the unpredictability of intentions. The West's intentions are clear and predictable for Russia now and in the medium term. This is why the document says nothing about relations with NATO or other Western institutions—Russia is taking a break, reasonably arguing that talking about them in a constructive way will only mean encouraging unilateral attacks.

Russia no longer argues with the West and does not try to convince it that its actions are erroneous and short-sighted. The new Strategy rather dispassionately records the current state of affairs—the West is destroying globalization because it is losing influence on it, and it is doing this using all available means and acting on all fronts. This is why it is necessary to block emerging threats along the entire perimeter, rather than expect any indulgency. However, when it comes to the activities of corporations controlling the Internet, the Strategy does not draw any connection between their policies and government decisions in the West. Unlike traditional security, Russia understands that Facebook or Google are interested in preserving global markets and will try to act on their own, not entirely under dictation. In general, although the Strategy emphasizes the importance of threats in the information space, it does not mention any plans to “disconnect” Russia from it.

In general, the Strategy explicitly names only two states, cooperation with which is important for Russia. These are China and India. China comes first because it is a privileged ally for Russia and it has proved its reliability in recent years. But we must not forget about India. Russia will inevitably have to mediate between the two great Asian powers, and therefore cooperation with New Delhi continues despite its flirtation with the United States and Europe. Ultimately, there are no and there can be no objective contradictions between Russia and India.

The important novelty of the document concerns the role of force in international politics. The previous Strategy 2015 indicated that the importance of this factor was “not declining.” The new document says that all states are expanding the use of force, primarily Western countries that so far have the greatest offensive capabilities. The Strategy describes the overall international situation not as emerging polycentricity, as was the case before, but as the “growing number of development centers” and new leading countries. Thus, the document analytically records the transition from the formation of a “world of poles” to a more flexible international order, which in science terms is called the “balance of power.” This is a purely dynamic process that does not imply any probability of constant state. Russia acknowledges this and begins to play under the new conditions.

Summing up this brief and unsystematic review, I can say that in setting priorities, the Strategy really takes into account historical experience and modern international realities. Such a document is, in fact, a description of how the state assesses problems and determines priorities in solving its most important task and realizing its national interest—survival in a chaotic international environment. For Russia, domestic issues will always take priority, and international ones will always be secondary. At the same time, historical experience, especially of the 20th century, suggests that the inability to limit the penetration of external ideological influence reflecting the national interests of other countries can play a fatal role, given Russia's inherent lentiude in solving internal development problems.