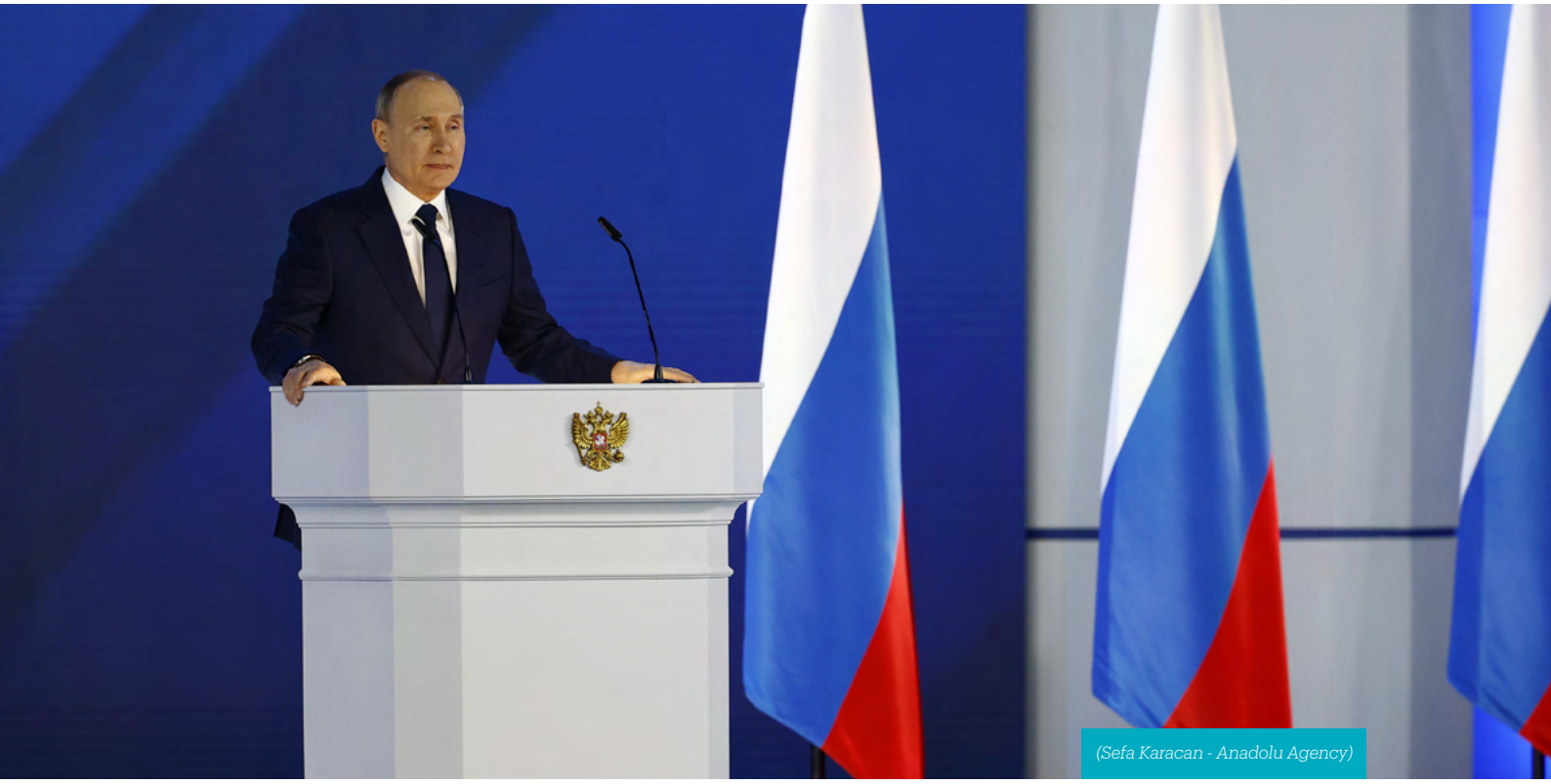
POLICY OUTLOOK

TRT WORLD research centre

Russia's National Security Strategy: Ideology, Strategic Priorities and Threat Perceptions

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(Sefa Karacan - Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook analyses Russia's strategic priorities, national interests and threat perceptions by examining its latest national security strategy document. Russian foreign policy elites believe that the world is undergoing significant transformations through which the global balance of power is shifting, new power centres are emerging, and existing international institutions and rules are losing ground. As a result of these changes, the risk of conflicts and instability in the world is increasing. Against this backdrop, Moscow seeks to adapt the country to the emerging world order. The strategy document reveals that Moscow continues to distance itself from the West while deepening cooperation with Asian countries, most notably China and India. Additionally, Moscow considers dealing with domestic issues such as demographic trends, economic inequality, education and corruption as a key to the achievement of its wider national security objectives.

The opinions expressed in this policy outlook represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

Introduction

Russia adopted its newest National Security Strategy (NSS) document on July 2, 2021 outlining the Kremlin's national interests, strategic priorities and threat perceptions. The document identifies key challenges and threats in the short and long run and prescribes the measures and capabilities needed to address these issues. NSS documents are of critical importance for understanding how states view international politics, which issues are considered as national security concerns and what actions will be taken in order to secure national interests. In this regard, Moscow's latest strategy document is helpful to understanding how Russia positions itself given the increasing uncertainty in world politics, thereby providing insight into the possible future direction of Russian foreign policy.

Although Russia's latest security strategy document has been built upon the previous one, which was adopted in 2015, it has geared up the confrontational approach with the West and expanded the scope of the potential areas and actors of challenges including online activities, challenges presented by transnational corporations and attacks on the Russian culture. The document clearly notes that the world is going through a tough period where the possibilities of conflict and use of force are dramatically increasing while existing institutions are failing to address these problems.

The notion that world politics is going through a process of transition is not new as many scholars and experts have shared similar views for some time. Accordingly, it has been argued that the liberal order, based on the ideas of democracy, economic interdependence and empowered international institutions, has weakened thanks to both internal and external challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated this trend. Additionally, the process of globalization has slowed down, particularly in economic terms, leading to discussions on deglobalization and its implications on the conduct of world politics. Moreover, the perceived decline of the US and the rise of China has precipitated a strategic competition between the two while other rising states have set out to increase their global and regional spheres of influence. In such a shifting international context, Russia's guiding paper not only reveals the intention to adapt the country to the emerging world order, but to be one of its central actors.

As a reflection of these transformations, Moscow seems to have abandoned what can best be described as the liberal discourse it used in the previous document as the clauses on the development of cooperation with the West - most importantly with the US - on certain strategic issues have disappeared in the new document. Additionally, while Moscow continues to distance itself from the West, it is increasingly seeking to develop mutually beneficial partnerships and cooperative relations with Asian countries. This is in addition to Moscow's special focus on the need to address pre-existing socio-economic challenges on the domestic front. These strategic priorities can be interpreted as a signal of Russia's determination to adapt its foreign policy to a new era characterized by increasing competition between great powers over the shape of the future world order.

Moscow's view of the current state of the world

The Kremlin projects a gloomy picture of the world plagued by a growing possibility of conflicts and instability due to the ramifications of the ongoing transformations in the global distribution of power. For Moscow, the hegemony of the West, which was consolidated after the end of the Cold War is perceived to be declining and its values and institutions are losing ground. With the emergence of new regional and global powers, the world has been moving into a multipolar structure, giving way to competing interests in many issue areas. Additionally, these emerging power centres appear more willing to resort to military force in order to attain their geopolitical aspirations.

Against this backdrop, the Kremlin highlights that the desire of the Western powers to maintain their hegemony together with the failure of the liberal economic model to produce equitable global economic and social development have increased the risk of global political instability. This is in addition to the rising power of transnational corporations and the weakening of international institutions and norms. Existing global and regional security mechanisms are failing to provide stability and resolve long-standing conflicts in the face of growing tensions in many parts of the world including the post-Soviet space and the Middle East, leading to the proliferation and spread of terrorism and extremist ideas. Within this context, the document notes that Moscow should pursue a multilateral approach, primarily through the mechanisms of the UN and its Security Council, in order to reinstate global peace and stability while enhancing its economic, political, military and 'spiritual potential' to become one of the central players in the emerging global order.

The document also notes that the international economy is in deep recession and the international financial system is increasingly unstable. This is in addition to a decrease in investment flows and a slowdown in the formation of new global production and supply chains. Moreover, the use of economic sanctions and protectionist measures as well as the politicization of economic cooperation and lack of trust are considered threats to the prospects of the global economy. The liberal economic model is considered to be the primary contributing factor to global socio-economic issues, imbalanced economic development and inequalities. With advancements in technology, the world econo-

my has undergone significant transformations in terms of market structure, capital and labour, resulting in the emergence of new centres of economic gravity and influence. Additionally, these same technological developments are creating a new economic environment requiring new skills and qualifications and increasing the importance of innovation to economic development.

Moscow also considers information security as a key national security issue. The document notes that information and communication technologies are being used to interfere in the internal affairs of other states, thereby undermining the principle of sovereignty. On this note, the document highlights that Russia is being targeted by cyber-attacks and by the dissemination of false information aimed at disrupting the social cohesiveness of Russian society. In addition to foreign states, Moscow also views the activities of transnational corporations as potentially dangerous, claiming that they seek to dominate the internet and control information resources in the absence of agreed upon legal regulations. They are also held responsible for the production of false information with regards to Russian history and current events in Russia for political reasons. For example, Russia fined Twitter for not removing contents encouraging young people to join protests in support of outspoken Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny this past spring. The document also underscores the protection of what it refers to as "traditional values" as one of the top national security priorities. In this regard, it highlights that humanity is at risk of losing what it refers to as "traditional spiritual" and moral guidelines. Religious and cultural values and the institution of marriage and the family are being subjected to destructive threats, according to the document.

Relations with the West

Relations with the West – most notably with the US - have been deteriorating in recent years, particularly since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, marking their lowest level since the end of the Cold War. Russia's projection of power and influence operations in its neighbourhood and beyond, including in Syria and Libya, cyber-attacks on government agencies and infrastructure and domestic issues related to democracy and rule of law are causes of concern for Western governments. The enlargement of NATO on Russia's borders, the EU's support for the pro-democracy movement in Russia and neighbouring countries and economic sanctions are among the recent issues causing concern for Moscow. These are in addition to the history of rivalry between the two camps dating back to the Cold War, which has exacerbated threat perceptions.



US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet in Geneva, Switzerland on June 16, 2021. (Kremlin Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

Despite the current strain on relations, with the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia and the West started a process of rapprochement, which resulted in the formation of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council in 1997, the NATO-Russia Council in 2002, and Russian support for the US 'War on Terror' initiated after the 9/11 terror attacks. During this period, the West set out to integrate Russia into the liberal world order. For its part, Moscow revealed its intention - at least rhetorically - to pursue similar objectives. Hence, despite the ebbs and flows in relations, previous Russian strategic documents underlined the importance of developing cooperative relations with the West and adopted a language reflective of the values, norms and rules of the liberal order. For instance, the 2015 NSS document included detailed clauses on possible areas of cooperation with the West. With regards to relations with European countries and the EU, the 2015 document advocated consolidation of mutually beneficial cooperation and harmonization of the integration process between Europe and the post-Soviet space. On the relationships with the US, the previous document revealed Moscow's desire to establish a full-fledged partnership with Washington based on coincident interests, particularly on issues of arms control, nuclear non-proliferation and the fight against terrorism. Additionally, the 2015 document even had a section on relations with NATO, signalling Moscow's intention to establish relations with the Alliance to enhance security in the Euro-Atlantic region conditioned on NATO's willingness to consider Russian interests. Hence, even after the disruption of relations with the West in the wake of the Ukraine Crisis of 2014 and the subsequent imposition of economic sanctions, there had still been hope for the possibility of cooperative relations with the West in Moscow.

However, the new strategy document demonstrates that room for a cooperative relationship with the West is now so diminished that the clauses regarding the development of cooperative relations have disappeared altogether. The West has collectively been referred to only in negative terms and the US and its allies are officially described as unfriendly countries intent on containing Russia. Hence, the West is considered the primary source of many of the challenges and threats posed to Russian interests. In this regard, the West poses direct military threats to Russian interests primarily through the build of NATO military infrastructure near Russian borders. Additionally, the Kremlin accuses the US of abandoning its international obligations with regards to arms control. Moreover, although the document does not specifically name it, the West is held responsible for the dissemination of false information meant to destabilize the socio-political situation in Russia, exerting economic pressure through sanctions and actively attacking what the document consistently refers to as traditional Russian spiritual and historical values. Additionally, unfriendly countries are accused of trying to use existing socio-economic problems in Russia to destroy its internal unity and radicalize the protest movement in order to split Russian society. Given the harsh and fierce criticisms towards the West collectively on several issue areas, the Kremlin seems to have abandoned the possibility of a normalization in relations in the near future as long as the West continues to pursue what Russia sees as belligerent policies towards it.

Relations with China

Unlike its deteriorating relations with the West, Moscow has prioritized developing better relations with Asian powers, most notably with China and India, and deepening cooperation with regional countries through organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS and RIC (Russia, India, China). Reflecting this, the Russian strategy document notes the importance of the comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction with China and privileged strategic partnership with India for regional stability and security. It is noteworthy that the document uses the word "Asia-Pacific" instead of the "Indo-Pacific" used by the US to define the region, revealing Moscow's rejection of the US approach.



Chinese President Xi Jinping meets Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Russia on June 05, 2019 (Kremlin Press Office / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

Relations between Russia and China have strengthened in many areas, including the economy, politics and security, particularly since 2014. The perceived threat from the US to both Russia and China has been one of the critical factors contributing to the improvement of relations. Additionally, both Moscow and Beijing have been subjected to economic pressures from the West and criticized for human rights and democracy related issues. In this context, China and Russia have upgraded their cooperation to a comprehensive strategic partnership, which is considered just short of an alliance by some experts. The economic interaction between the two has dramatically increased in recent years, particularly in the field of energy. Moreover, the bilateral trade volume surpassed $100 billion for the first time in in 2018. They have held joint military drills in the region and collaborated on defence technology, demonstrating the extent of their shared security objectives. The two have also advocated the idea of redesigning the international order and its primary institutions based on a new distribution of power.

Notwithstanding the improving relations, some analysts have claimed that relations between Russia and China have seen their peak and certain problems might bring about their deterioration in the long run. Asymmetry in relations, the question of who will lead the partnership, and spheres of influence in the region are some of the issues that will require both countries to deal with in order to sustain their burgeoning partnership. In particular, Russia's growing economic and technological dependence on China presents a concern for Moscow. Reflecting on this point, it can be claimed that the new document adopts a subtly cautious approach towards China compared to the previous one.

Unlike the previous version of the NSS where cooperation with China and India was mentioned in separate paragraphs, the 2021 NSS combines them in one paragraph. For some analysts, this is a reflection of the importance attached by Russian policymakers to balancing China with India. Additionally, while the strategic partnership with China was referred to as "a key factor in the maintenance of global and regional stability" in the previous version, the 2021 NSS appears to drop this approach and considers Russia's strategic cooperation with China important mainly for regional security. It is also important to note that the paper refers to Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) project, introduced in 2015 by Putin. The document notes that within the framework of the GEP, Moscow will seek to ensure the integration of economic systems the development of multilateral cooperation within the region. For some analysts, Moscow's reference to the GEP could be considered as an implicit revelation of the fact that Russia opposes any attempt to dominate the regional economic system, most importantly by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite the presence of these implicit elements in the strategy document, it should also be noted that relations between China and Russia will likely remain strong as long as common threat perceptions and convergence of interests remain.

Inward Focus

One of the main features of Russia's latest strategy document is its special focus on domestic issues, considering them key to the achievement of its wider national security objectives. In this regard, it can be said that Moscow seems to be acknowledging that domestic hurdles should be addressed first in order to attain the outlined objectives. The document clearly notes that the national security of Russia is related to the socio-economic development of the country. In this sense, the document puts particular emphasis on the sustainable development of the country in the long run through improvements in the field of economy, societal bonds and the military sector. These are in addition to commitments to improve the quality of life of its citizens, overcome negative demographic trends, solve problems in healthcare, and reduce poverty and inequality. Importantly, unlike the previous iteration, the present document starts with a section on developing human potential and capital, which has become a significant concern for Moscow thanks in particular to decreasing birth rates. Restructuring the economy through a transformation from dependence on the the export of raw materials and agricultural products to high-tech industries is considered the key to realizing sustainable economic growth. Moreover, the technological independence of the military-industrial complex and preserving Moscow's leadership in the military sector are also regarded as important to realizing Russia's core national interests. Moscow also underscores, the need to develop alternative energy resources and low carbon energy in response to the climate crisis. It is important to note that the latest strategy document puts great emphasis on strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and preserving the cultural and historical heritage of the Russian people in order to maintain social cohesion and unity. The Kremlin appears to be adopting internal balancing strategies by concentrating on the enhancement of its domestic resources in order to increase its actual and potential power.

The NSS document underscores the importance of restructuring the economy. Although the Russian economy has stagnated thanks largely to the negative impacts of economic sanctions imposed in 2014 and sharp drop in oil prices, it has been slowly recovering in recent years. Additionally, Russia has dealt relatively well with the negative economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has raised Moscow's confidence. Moreover, as a result of economic sanctions, Moscow has also managed to adjust its its economic outlook, particularly in the agricultural and financial sectors. However, despite these developments, the Russian economy still faces several structural challenges. One of the primary challenges has to do with Russia's dependence on the export of natural resources –

oil and natural gas - which renders it vulnerable to price fluctuations. The document acknowledges this challenge and advocates transforming the economy into one based on technology, digitalization and innovation. Additionally, Russia's dependence on the import of critical technologies, equipment and components is also noted as a national security concern requiring Russia to invest in science and technology. However, the dominance of state-controlled enterprises in the Russian economy represents a key hurdle to achieving these objectives as it diminishes competition and innovation. Inequality and corruption appear as the other structural issues posing challenges to Moscow's transformation efforts and increasing public dissent.

Conclusion

The latest strategy document reveals that Moscow is adapting itself to the rapidly changing international order by great emphasis on the importance of preserving the independence and sovereignty of the country. Terms such as "technological independence", "cultural sovereignty", "economic sovereignty", "sovereignty in the information space", all of which are perceived to be challenged in some way or another, are repeatedly used throughout the document. Although it is not unusual for a national security strategy document to highlight the importance of sovereignty and independence, it is worth noting that by extending its usage and application to the culture and information space, Moscow seems determined to take a go it alone approach. In this regard, Moscow's special focus on the domestic front and its priortization of pre-existing economic, social and technology-related issues are relevant for Russia's assumed role as an independent and self-reliant actor in the emerging multipolar world. Hence, while the Kremlin praises developing better cooperation and partnership with regional countries, it also advocates transactional relations on the basis of mutual interests, rejecting ideological alliances or block-thinking. On this note, Russia rejects becoming China's junior partner and being overly dependent on China, particularly when it comes to the economy and technology. Additionally, Moscow appears determined not only to become an independent and self-reliant actor but also to take on a 'moral leadership' role and build an ideological basis for the future world order through its system of values. In this regard, Moscow's insistence on strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values can be considered as a deliberate policy aimed at attracting other countries and political groups who are critical of US hegemony and its imposition of liberal principles and what is deemed the 'Westernization' of local cultures. In this sense, Russia's emphasis on what it calls 'traditional values' such as the importance of family, the protection of religious foundations, the priority of the spiritual over the material and collectivism has a lot to do with uniting Russian people around common bonds and shared values in order to diminish the risk of public dissent. However, considered as a soft power instrument, its impacts on international politics could be quite significant given that the contents of these traditional Russian values also have the potential to appeal to diverse political groups in different countries, ranging from the far left to Orthodox Christians, who are united by their opposition to liberalism. In particular, so-called historical Russian values can also be attractive tool to gather support for Russian policies in post-Soviet countries.

Based on Russia's strategic outlook, it can be stated that the normalization of relations between Russia and the West seems unlikely in the near future. Although the June 16, 2021 meeting between President Biden and President Putin eased tensions to a limited extent, the underlying issues remained unresolved. However, it should be also noted that relations could become more stable and predictable as the Russian challenge is of secondary importance to the Biden administration compared to China and its Indo-Pacific strategy. In this situation, the US might prefer not to channel its resources towards Russia and opt for a Russian policy that prioritizes selective cooperation on critical issues including climate change, nuclear proliferation and the fight against terrorism. Regarding China, Moscow appears willing to deepen its strategic partnership with Beijing based on mutual interests. Unlike establishing an ideological bloc or a formal alliance, Moscow appears to want to preserve the current state of relations with China and strengthen collaboration where they share interests without being drawn into a competition between the US and China. In parallel, Moscow also seeks to expand its partnerships with other regional countries in order to avoid an over-dependency on China. The future of Sino-Russian relations will likely be shaped in large part by two developments; whether or not the US will be perceived as a common threat by both Russia and China, and whether China will show self-restraint in its foreign policy, particularly as it relates to Central Asia.



Russian President Vladimir Putin observes the Zapad-2021 military exercise on September 13, 2021. (Kremlin Press Office- Anadolu Agency)