

Threatening a pivot towards Asia: a new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation

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On 30 November, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (the fifth in the history of post-Soviet Russia), which replaced the document issued in February 2013. This new concept, like the previous one, assumes the decline of the West and the end of American dominance in the system of international relations, which is becoming multi-polar. The main objective of the concept is to convince the West to make concessions to Russia, in order to end the conflict with it and normalise mutual relations. The concept suggests that such normalisation is primarily needed by the West, while Russia could find alternative partners in Asia, with which it has successfully been developing cooperation. To this end, the document exaggerates both the present results and the future prospects of Russian efforts to intensify its cooperation with Asian partners, while at the same time suggesting that only by normalising relations with Russia can the West prevent the conversion of Chinese-Russian relations into an anti-Western alliance. The Concept, on the one hand, highlights Russia's exaggerated assumptions about the weakness of the West, while on the other it disregards Russia's own domestic (especially economic) weaknesses and its continuing dependence on economic ties with the West, and also masks the difficulties and potential risks in Russia's relations with its Asian partners.

Long-term trends and short-term objectives

On the one hand, the Concept is a reflection of how the Russian authorities perceive the fundamental processes in the international arena and how they define their long-term goals. On the other, it serves as an instrument of current Russian foreign policy, sending signals to both its (current) opponents and its (potential) partners.

The Concept repeats its diagnosis of the West from the 2013 document: the West's weakening, the end of American hegemony, the rise of the new Asian powerhouses, and the formation of a new 'multi-polar' world order. Furthermore, Russia's main policy objective remains unchanged: supporting the emergence of the new global order, and defending it against attempts by the United States and its allies to halt and reverse this process.

The document has been modified with regard to the tactical demands resulting from Russia's open conflict with the West and the ongoing growth of China's power. The purpose of these modifications is to demonstrate Russia's self-confidence and the opportunities opened up to it by the rise of the Asian countries, which can supposedly provide an

alternative to its economic ties with the West. These new emphases are intended to convince the West that continuing its current policy towards Russia will only involve additional costs and risks, in the form of escalating conflict, economic losses, and the loss of potential benefits, especially in the form of Russian assistance in the fight against international Islamic terrorism.

The 'crisis' in Russian-Western relations and its consequences

According to the Concept, Russia's relations with the West are in 'crisis', the reason for which is the 'geopolitical expansion' of – it is worth emphasising – not only NATO, but the EU. The document blames the Western policy of containing Russia and exerting political, economic and informational pressure on it for both regional and global destabilisation.

The Concept signals a change in Russian priorities, towards developing relations with Asian countries and participating in integration processes in Asia. The phrases about 'prioritising' the development of relations with the Euro-Atlantic region and the 'strategic community of aims' between Russia and the West which were present in the 2013 Concept have been visibly absent from the current version. Similarly all references to the common civilisational identity of Russia and the West have been removed as well.. The EU is no longer Russia's 'main' economic partner, only an 'important' one, and the Concept names as a potential partner for cooperation not the EU *en bloc*, but rather 'EU member states'. There is no longer any reference to concluding a new basic agreement on strategic partnership, nor of the creation of mechanisms for cooperation in the area of foreign and security policy, nor building a 'shared space' or a single market. Instead, there are references to harmonisation and joining both European and Eurasian integration processes.

There has also been a shift in the passages referring to the United States: in the previous version of the document, the emphasis (the 'long-term priority') had been placed on laying the economic foundations for dialogue. In the new version, Russia declares that it is interested in building a 'mutually beneficial relationship' with Washington on issues of strategy and international security, especially in the field of the fight against the threat of international Islamic terrorism. The Concept also warns about the possibility of a 'serious reaction' in the event of 'hostile actions' by the US, and openly describes the creation of a global anti-missile system as a 'threat' to the security of Russia, announcing that it will take 'appropriate retaliatory measures'.

This part of the Concept dedicated to relations with the West is intended to make the impression that Russia's revisionist policy in Europe is purely defensive, and that the Western policy of pressure on Russia is doomed to fail, as it is contrary to the change (supposedly purely objective in nature) in the balance of power in the international arena.

Russia's 'Asian alternative'

The part of the document concerning relations in the Asia-Pacific region has been given more weight: strengthening Russia's position in the region and activating relations with the states there is referred to as 'strategically important'. The document contains the idea of raising relations with the ASEAN countries to the level of a 'strategic partnership', and sets

the objective of harmonising the integration processes within the Asia-Pacific region and in Eurasia, comprising ASEAN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union. Suggestions from the previous version that Russia's relations with China and India are of equal value have disappeared from the document. China is listed in first place among Russia's Asian partners, and India comes second. The description of Russia's relationship with China remain almost the same as in 2013, while that of India has been reinforced with references to 'historical friendship' and 'deep mutual trust' (relations with China are described solely in terms of a convergence of interests).

It is also important to note the change in the description of Japan, where it is not economic cooperation that is discussed, but rather 'ensuring stability and security in the Asia-Pacific region', and from which references to territorial conflicts and the need to resolve them have been removed.

These descriptions reflect the growing importance of China as Russia's most important partner in the international arena. Russia wants to demonstrate that the relationship-building process with its Asian partners (especially China) is continuing, and wishes to give the impression that these can override its relationships with the West.

At the same time, the descriptions relating to India, Japan and the ASEAN countries indicate that Russia is seeking to diversify its Asian policy and trying to rebalance its relationship with China. The wording used in the document suggests a lack of trust in Russia's relations with Beijing, while trying to mask the problems in relations with Delhi (due to the intensification of relations between Delhi and Washington, and between Moscow and Beijing). The use of these phrases may be intended to show both the West and China and the other Asian partners that Russia is seeking to rebalance its relationship with Beijing. This is to encourage the West, particularly Washington, to change its policy towards Russia, in order to draw it away from further rapprochement with China.

Unrealistic underlying assumptions and concealing reality

The latest Concept is built on partially false and unrealistic premises, and serves more to conceal reality than to provide an objective and substantive analysis of the international situation. It is based on an exaggerated assessment of the weakness of the West and completely ignores the critical state of the Russian economy and Russia's low attractiveness as a partner in international cooperation. It falsely presents Russian policy as a purely defensive reaction to the aggressive actions of the West. Moreover, it tries to hide the failure of the attempts of many years to diversify Russia's economic ties in the direction of Asia, and the ongoing economic dependence of Russia on its economic relationship with the West. It also fails to mention the dangers posed by the growing asymmetry in its relations with Beijing.