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COMMENT

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Threat perception affects operational doctrines > Russia's new national security strategy does not provide much hope for cooperation

Russia's new security strategy can be read as an overview of the Russian leadership's world view. The new document puts more emphasis on threats and problems than its predecessor, subsuming national security within the protection of broadly and vaguely defined national interests.

On 31 December 2015 the Russian Federation adopted a new National Security Strategy that replaced the previous one published in 2009. This is the second major foreign and security political document revised within a short period of time, as in December 2014 Russia also adopted a new military doctrine. At that time, adjustments to the doctrine signalled the heightened perception of a threat towards the current Russian regime and augured a new crisis phase in Russia's relations with the West.

The new national security strategy begins in a similar manner to other Russian strategic documents, and defines the terms used in the text. The document frames Russian national security in terms of national interests. In fact, the term "national interest" constitutes an overarching element of the new document and of its interpretation of security. Accordingly, the "threat to national security" is defined as: a set of conditions and factors creating a direct or indirect possibility of harm to national interests.

However, the document provides only a rather general definition of what these national interests entail. According to the introductory part, they are: the objectively significant requirements of the individual, society and the state with regard

to ensuring their protection and sustainable development. Another definition is subsequently given, but that one encompasses almost everything, ranging from military defence and territorial integrity to increasing the competitiveness of the national economy, creating a perception somewhat similar to the Western concept of comprehensive security.

Although it is debatable just how deep the vision of comprehensive security was in the preceding version of the strategy, in the new one this concept is devoid of any real meaning. Judging from the chapter structure of the strategy, national security is composed of military security, state and public security, improvement of living standards, economic growth, science and technology development, insurance, culture, and ecology. These together comprise what is generally understood as comprehensive security. However, the text itself ties national security only to vaguely defined national interests, which gives the political leadership a lot of room for manoeuvre.

In the strategy, bilateral and multilateral cooperation are restructured as parts of a strategic balance. This signals an understanding of world politics as a struggle between major powers accompanied by the

emergence of new regional actors. Reference is made here, first and foremost, to the development of regional integration projects in Eurasia and to the importance of maintaining a strategic partnership with China and India. The potential challenges posed by these countries to Russia are not mentioned in the document at all.

In line with the prioritization of strategic balance, the strategy defines consolidating the Russian Federation as one of the leading world powers as a key national interest. Taking into account the structural, long-term economic and other weaknesses of Russia, this wording implies that the Kremlin will probably keep relying predominantly on military power to maintain its perceived leader status, despite the claims in the strategy about Russia pursuing a peaceful foreign policy.

The emphasis on strategic balance also reflects the Russian view of the Ukraine conflict as a confrontation between Russia and the West. The Western sanctions and verbal condemnation of the annexation of Crimea and other military actions in Ukraine are dismissed with a reference to Russia's independent foreign and domestic policy that has given rise to opposition from the United States and its allies, who are seeking

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to retain their dominance in world affairs. This is referred to as a policy of containment whereby it is argued that Russia is subject to political, economic, military and informational pressure from abroad.

Lastly, again compared to the 2009 strategy, the new document puts much more emphasis on challenges, problems and threats to national security and pays much less attention to opportunities, positive prospects and initiatives. The overall tone of Russia's new national security strategy is guided by a world view that exaggerates threats, overrates Russia's status in international politics, and underestimates the value of cooperation. The main danger here is that the threat perception reflected in this document might lead to such doctrines that have little value in providing strategic insight into the challenges that lie ahead for Russia.

This fundamentally reactive approach as well as the intention to group all aspects of life under the umbrella of security may well be interpreted as another victory for the conservative silovik elites – those politicians and decision-makers with a background in the security or military services.

The prioritization of the protection of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values implies that rising

up against or simply questioning those – again undefined – values may well be categorized as a threat to national security. This part does not bode well for any liberal or opposition movements in Russia.

To sum up, the strategy can be read as a blueprint for a non-dependency policy geared to secure Russia's interests in its immediate neighbourhood. But there is little in the document that could guide the Russian leaders on how to cooperate with others in the 21st century. Instead, the new strategy can be read as an overview of the Russian leadership's world view and, hence, of the assumptions that will guide Russia's reactions in any future conflicts.