

An anti-colonial alliance with the Global South. The new 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation'

Witold Rodkiewicz

On 31 March, President Vladimir Putin signed the new 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation'. This is the fifth version of the document adopted by the Russian Federation, and the fourth under his rule (the previous ones were adopted in 1993, 2000, 2008, 2013 and 2016). The current edition is primarily of significance as propaganda. Its main purpose is to present Moscow's conflict with the West as a defence against Western policies, which allegedly pose an existential threat to Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The document depicts Russia as the defender of the non-Western world against Western hegemony and neo-colonialism. The document also reflects a reorientation of Russia's foreign policy towards its non-Western partners (primarily China, India, the 'Islamic world' and the Asia-Pacific region) at the expense of frozen or hostile relations with the transatlantic community, especially the United States.

Objectives of the new concept

The previous concept needed revision due to the significant change in Russia's international position after it began its open aggression against Ukraine. The previous versions were largely formal and ritualistic, and were linked to Putin's (in 2000 and 2012) and Dmitri Medvedev's (in 2008) respective ascensions to the presidency. Only the 2016 redaction was similarly conditioned by the significant change in Russia's international position following the annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Ukraine.

A key objective of the new concept is to portray Russia as an innocent victim of a "collective West" that for years has been pursuing an "anti-Russian policy" and has now allegedly unleashed a "new type of hybrid war" against it, using the "Russian military assault on Ukraine as a mere "pretext". The document refers to the Russian assault in an extremely euphemistic way, as "measures adopted by the Russian Federation in defence of its existential interests in the Ukrainian direction". This is the only direct reference to Russia's war against Ukraine in the entire document of over forty pages.

According to the Concept, the reason for the West's "anti-Russian policy" is the very fact that Russia is pursuing an "independent foreign policy", which supposedly poses a threat to the alleged "Western hegemony". At the same time, the document claims that Moscow itself "does not consider itself an enemy of the West" and "has no hostile intentions towards it", but only wants the West to "return



to pragmatic interaction” with Russia. This is a typical Russian propaganda ploy, intended to divert attention from the real problem and the genuine causes of the West’s current course towards Russia, i.e. the latter’s invasion of Ukraine and its territorial revisionism. Moscow’s revisionist policy is presented as a defence against the West’s alleged desire to subjugate Russia and dismember its territory.

Relations with a hostile West

While all the versions of the concept adopted under Putin pointed to differences of interest and tensions between Russia and the West, and the 2016 one did indeed speak openly of a crisis in mutual relations, the latest document explicitly accuses the West of seeking “global domination” and of “neo-colonial and hegemonic ambitions”. While according to the 2016 Concept, the West was merely pursuing a “containment” strategy towards Russia, limited to economic, political and informational pressure, the current Concept characterises Western policy as “aggressive”, “anti-Russian” and “hostile”. Its alleged aim is to “weaken” Russia, “limit its sovereignty”, “destroy its territorial integrity”, “create a threat to its security”, “undermine its internal political stability” and “dilute traditional Russian spiritual and moral values”. Proclaiming that “Russia intends to defend its right to exist in response to the hostile actions of the West”, the concept even suggests that the ultimate goal of Western policy is to destroy Russia. The document attributes the main role of “inspirer, organiser and executor” of this policy to the United States.

The Concept symbolically demotes Russia’s relations with Europe and the US by placing the fragments devoted to them after the sections on non-Western states, and emphasising their conflictual nature.

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This contrasts with the 2016 version, in which relations with the West (the Euro-Atlantic area) were – despite their contradictions and tensions – identified as a priority. At the same time, the current Concept treats the West in a different manner. It portrays Europe as being to some extent a victim of the United States, which supposedly seeks to weaken the former’s economy and competitiveness. The only salvation for the Old Continent is supposed to lie in restoring its sovereignty and renouncing its anti-Russian policy, thus establishing a “new model of coexistence” with Russia. This would enable European states to “take a dignified place” in Russia’s integration project for Eurasia, the Greater Eurasian Partnership.

In turn, the US is portrayed as the main instigator of the anti-Russian course of the West and the main source of threat not only to Russia’s security, but also to “international peace and the progressive development of humanity”. Even if Washington does abandon its anti-Russian policy, the document envisages a Russian-US relationship based at most on “strategic parity” (i.e. a strategic balance of nuclear weapons) and “peaceful coexistence” (the term which was used to describe US-Soviet relations during the post-Stalin phase of the Cold War).

The Concept also contains signals addressed to the West which are clearly meant to deter it from supporting Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression. Firstly, it warns that there is a growing risk of a clash between nuclear states and, as a consequence, of an outbreak of a regional or global war. This contrasts with the 2016 version, which claimed that the danger of a full-scale war between nuclear powers was not high. Secondly, the current version invokes Article 51 of the UN Charter to assert Russia’s right to use armed force not only to repel an armed attack against itself or its allies, but also to prevent any such attack. Such an extended interpretation of the right to self-defence is contrary to international law. This open legal revisionism exposes the deep hypocrisy of the heavy emphasis which Russian diplomacy has always placed on the need for strict adherence to international law.

Russia as champion of anti-colonialism

The Concept's depiction of Russian foreign policy and the international situation is meant to stimulate understanding of and sympathy towards Russia from the non-Western world. Russia is presented as a superpower destined to fight for a just and 'democratic' international order (which it calls "multipolarity"). Moscow is allegedly fulfilling this mission by resolutely opposing the West's efforts to impose its neo-colonial dependence and hegemony on the rest of the world.

According to the Concept, these Western "neo-colonial and hegemonic" aspirations have two dimensions: economic and ideological-civilisational. In the first, the West seeks to impose, or

maintain, a system based on the "exploitation of the resources" of the Global South. In doing so, it seeks to "halt the natural course of history", namely a shift of economic and political power towards non-Western states and powers, and to "eliminate its military-political and economic rivals". In the ideological-civilisational dimension, the West allegedly wants to impose "destructive neo-liberal ideological principles contrary to traditional spiritual and moral values" and its model of development on the whole world. To this end, it has been interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states, including by initiating *coups d'état* under the banner of so-called 'colour revolutions'.

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The changing geographical priorities of Russia's foreign policy

The new Concept proclaims a shift in the geographical priorities of Russia's foreign policy. Moscow now intends to focus on developing cooperation with the non-Western world, which encompasses most of humanity, and is supposedly interested not only in "constructive" relations with Russia, but also in "consolidating its position as an influential world power".

Outside the post-Soviet area (which had been accorded formal priority in all editions of the concept since 1993), Russia should first of all concentrate on a "comprehensive deepening of ties and coordination" with China and India, which are described as "friendly global sovereign power centres". The absolute priority of the relationship with Beijing is indicated not only by its being named before New Delhi (as was the case in 2016), but also by its explicit identification as the priority, and by the inclusion of the phrase about "showing mutual assistance" in the description (this phrase was absent in the previous version). In the description of relations with India, on the other hand, the document no longer includes the postulate of "cooperation" on international issues" (as the 2016 edition did), and focuses on economic cooperation.

The above changes in the text reflect the real evolution that has taken place in the Russia-China-India triangle between 2016 and 2023. Moscow's ties with Beijing have become closer during this period, while its relations with New Delhi were strained by the strengthening of India-US relations on the basis of a mutual anti-Chinese platform.

Russia's closer relations with China and India (particularly the former) are intended to form the core of the so-called Greater Eurasian Partnership, an ill-defined "network of partner organisations in Eurasia". Putin first proposed the idea of this Partnership back in 2015, albeit without providing any concrete details about its premises or organisation. The current Concept does not go beyond the original vague description of the project, confirming its virtual nature and purely propagandistic function of creating the appearance that Russia in Eurasia is the centre and initiator of integration processes equivalent to China's New Silk Road.

The Concept identifies the Asia-Pacific region as another priority, citing its “rapidly growing potential on many levels”. However, it fails to mention any specific countries as partners, and makes reference only to the regional organisation ASEAN and to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

According to the new version, Russia’s second most important international partner is the “Islamic world”. This is novel in the sense that the Concept treats an entire group of states, identified only ac-

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ording to a religious criterion, as a coherent international actor. This upgrading of Islamic civilisation, which the document describes as “friendly [to Russia]”, has been reflected in Moscow’s intensification of relations with a number of key Muslim states in the period following the invasion of Ukraine.

Among these potential partners from the ‘Islamic world’, the document singles out Iran as a state with which Russia is linked by “comprehensive and trustful cooperation”. The change in wording compared to the 2016 version, which spoke only of the multilateral development of cooperation with Tehran, illustrates the significant deepening of relations between the two states, which has become particularly evident since 24 February 2022. The other Muslim partners listed in the Concept are Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

It is noteworthy that the document is quite open about the anti-Western thrust of the posited intensification of Russian cooperation with African and Latin American states. Thus Russia’s priority in Africa is to show “support in securing sovereignty and independence” threatened by the “sophisticated neo-colonial policies of a number of the developed states”, while in Latin America it is to show “support for interested states, under pressure from the US and its allies, in securing their sovereignty and independence”.

Functions of the new Concept

The Concept is a strategic document, and as such fulfils two functions. Firstly, it is a foreign policy instrument which serves as a signal to both Russia’s adversaries and its (potential) partners, while also playing a role in propaganda, shaping the desired image of Russia and its actions in the international arena. Secondly, it sets a political benchmark for the Russian state apparatus (including diplomacy) and official propaganda. It instructs how to present Russian foreign policy and what narrative to use in doing so. In so doing, it elevates to the level of state doctrine the language and elements of the narrative (concepts, arguments) that appeared in official discourse and media propaganda after the adoption of the previous version in 2016 and since the start of full-scale aggression against Ukraine. The Concept can also be treated as a source for examining how the Kremlin elite perceive the international situation, and to some extent, what its foreign policy objectives and means are at this point.