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Russian Foreign Policy Finding New Bearings

A group of leading experts presents its vision
of Russian foreign policy priorities

This year will see the 25th anniversary of the Soviet Union's breakup and the emergence of new Russia on its ruins. Time is ripe for taking stocks and mapping a road into the future.

A group of members of Russia's Council on Defense and Foreign Policy (CDFP) has presented to the state and society its vision of the country's future foreign policy. We believe that resuming a creative foreign policy discussion will be useful. Amidst massive worldwide propaganda it is easy to fall into the trap of somebody else's or one's own delusions. The acute foreign policy discussion in Russia that lasted throughout the 1990s helped prevent both hopeless retreat and an attempt at a suicidal revanche, and laid the groundwork for return to a more realistic, national interests-oriented policy. These days we are recalling with "legitimate pride" the major role that the CDFP and its "liberal imperialists" (as our veterans were often referred to then) played in that debate.

The CDFP has drafted a list of key points and ideas it is now pleased to present (See: www.svop.ru and www.globalaffairs.ru). This memorandum contains an analysis of global and regional trends, achievements and failures of Russian policies, and also some proposals regarding Russia's future foreign policy that we deem beneficial. This article is an extra-brief summary of the last two sections of the memorandum in question.

Russian Foreign Policy Achievements

Russia's foreign policy in the past decade was successful by and large and quite masterful at times. It largely matched the world challenges. A stagnant economy was the weak link. Foreign policy has compensated for that weakness so far. But this resource is now close to exhaustion. The country has regained its military potential at a qualitatively new level and at still tolerable costs. The expansion of Western alliances to the territories Russia considers vital to its security has been stemmed, although it had to pay a dear price for that. The West is developing the long-awaited awareness that Russia's interests have to be taken into account. This means the basis is being laid for more sound and fairer relations in the future.

Russia is making a turn in the economy and to a certain extent in politics towards booming Asia through the development of Siberia and the Far East, although the turn is belated and slow. Relations of friendship and profound strategic partnership with China have been established. The agreement to pair the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union has proved helpful in avoiding rivalry in Central Asia. Vast potential has been built up for deepening cooperation with the ASEAN countries, Japan and South Korea.

As a result, Russia has secured a rather robust geopolitical position ahead of a new round of development (if it is destined to begin). In its day the Soviet Union was in confrontation with the West around the world and with China in the East. Also, it had to maintain the costly socialist bloc and countries of "socialist orientation" in the Third world. Today, Russia is involved in inevitable but eventually hopefully easing confrontation only with the West.

In contrast to what was observed in the last years of the Soviet Union and in the early days of new Russia, society's political morale has changed. The feeling of dismay and fading Communist ideology of the 1980s and the frustrating situation of the 1990s, when the revolutionary-minded minority was dictating to the majority a set of "liberal" values (that would eventually prove alien and not viable on Russian soil) have given way to the rise of patriotism,

state nationalism and more or less normal, traditional values. The same values are shared by a majority of humanity and, quite possibly, they have begun their comeback to the Western world, whose elite tried to reject them. It is very important that a majority of Russia's population and the elite find the new policy to be morally right and proper. This spells a fundamental distinction from the shame and wish to be liked of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Certain foreign policy setbacks did happen, of course, and many persisting problems remain unresolved. Attempts to build mutually beneficial and, consequently, stable relations in Europe and a viable system of European security ended in failure. The fratricidal conflict in Ukraine has not been prevented. To a large extent, because for the past twenty five years there was no sensible strategic policy in relation to that country. For many years it would remain a factor complicating constructive relations with Europe and a source of "black swans"—unpredictable challenges and provocations. There is a great risk that political, intellectual, managerial and economic resources will continue to be wasted on this sore spot, likely to remain hopeless for the coming years. Quite erroneous was the hope for resetting U.S.-Russia relations, because the underlying motive—strategic arms reductions—was of secondary importance. Moscow did not insist on the solution of the key issue—an end to the expansion of Western alliances.

The economic and political turn to the East has been slow. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, although it has expanded, is in half-slumber, and for almost a year one there have no results of the agreement to pair the Silk Road Economic Belt project and the Eurasian Economic Union. Russian policy remains targeted at the past and this is one of its worst problems. We are still correcting mistakes of the past. The Russian elite has not yet devised a national development strategy, including a proper foreign policy, that would be targeted at the future.

The basic conclusion is this: foreign policy achievements, the country's stronger strategic foothold and security, restoration of Russia's status of a first class great power which both a majority of the elite and the people aspire allow for—and the old and new challenges strongly require—shifting the attention of

the state and society to the tasks of internal economic development and the preservation and buildup of the nation's human capital. That a majority of the elite is not prepared for such override change in politics is rather discouraging.

Future-Targeted Foreign Policy

Russia's foreign policy in a new world should apparently proceed from the following principles and goals (complementing and developing the officially proclaimed ones): prevention of another global military collision; all-out support for the country's technological and economic development; and the preservation and multiplication of its human capital. There is no way of ensuring development without active involvement in international cooperation. It is essential to focus efforts on restoring and maintaining the supremacy of international law, above all the United Nations Charter. Russia must regain the status of a leading legitimistic world power.

The position Russia should seek in the future world is that of a stronghold of international peace and stability, a safeguard of free development by all countries and peoples, and a firm barrier against the dictating of alien rules and values from outside, let alone attempts to do so by force.

Russia's ideal foreign policy and economic status in the future is that of a great economically developing Atlantic and Pacific power that plays a central role in the Big Eurasian community, in the economic, logistic, military and political integration of Asia and Europe, a safeguard of international peace and a provider of military-political stability for Eurasia.

In practical policy, the following tasks should enjoy priority:

- high combat readiness and flexibility of the armed forces, nuclear forces in particular;

- launch of practical projects to back up Russia's turn eastwards; a policy of gradual creating—in cooperation with China, India, Iran and, apparently, with the ASEAN countries, South Korea, the EAEU allies and other countries—a Greater Eurasia Community, open to the world and seeking cooperation with the

EU countries. A more active SCO is seen as the central organization for Russia's future political and economic orientation. The movement towards creating a Eurasia community will provide a counterbalance to China's soaring strength and place it in a wider context. Apparently, China will benefit from this, too, for it will eliminate the risk China's neighbors, worried over its growing potential, might start to organize to balance it.

The foreign policy's primary bias towards the entire post-Soviet space should be gradually phased out. The Soviet Union ceased to exist 25 years ago. Remaining nostalgic for it will make no sense. The world has changed. A new policy is the imperative of the day.

Further efforts to step up the policy of support for Russian culture and language abroad and the establishment of relations with Russian diasporas is an urgent need. Russian citizens outside Russia must be certain that Russia will firmly rise in their defense, if need be. But using the slogan of "protecting the Russian world" to rationalize the feasibility of using military force outside Russia is unrealistic and counterproductive. Which does not mean, though, that Russia should refrain from the use of military force outside its national territory to counter obvious threats to its key interests.

Lastly, while turning towards the rising world of the Southeast the strategic orientation towards restoring and advancing neighborly relations with the European countries should be preserved. Recreation of the system of European security on the old basis is impossible. Promotion of the widest possible pragmatic cultural, economic, scientific, educational and humanitarian cooperation is the issue of the day. In relations with NATO, professional discussions among the military over ways to maintain peace and prevent conflicts will be useful, but the same can hardly apply to the just-started restoration of the political dialogue within the Russia-NATO Council; such debates proved either useless or often harmful in the past.

It might be sensible to preserve the OSCE for the period of uncertainty and turbulence, but the organization should be re-oriented mostly towards the

upgraded and expanded “first basket”—that for security—aimed at preventing and settling conflicts, drafting joint policies in the struggle with terrorism and in cooperation to maintain border security, at controlling immigration from neighboring regions, and at fighting cybercrime.

In relations with Europe for the coming decades it will apparently make sense to proceed from the understanding it is no longer a model to follow and still more so, not a threat. It is a close culture and a partner in economic and humanitarian interaction. We have drifted apart for the time being, but a new rapprochement is desirable and apparently possible.

The Ukraine and other similar crises should in the long term be addressed on the basis of agreed permanent neutrality and merger in new formats of cooperation and security. In the first place, Eurasian.

In view of the new realities, above all, China’s movement westward, the stake should be put on replacing Russia’s failed unilateral European geopolitical integration by Eurasian one, by transition from the aborted Greater Europe project towards Greater Eurasia or, in the long term, even towards a Community of Greater Eurasia from Singapore to Lisbon. The purpose of relations with the United States is to firmly prevent it from taking dangerous actions, particularly so during the period of adjustment to the new realities, and to create incentives that might make it give up its revolutionary democratic messianism. It will be most important, though, to push ahead with a long-term policy of cooperation in settling crises and preventing them from turning global. The main instrument here must be proactive, including multilateral, dialogue to prevent shaking international strategic stability loose.

We reiterate once again that number one task of Russia’s foreign policy, just as of Russia’s overall strategy, should be to ensure early exit from the development crisis, which the country is experiencing today and which endangers its long-term positions in the world and its sovereignty. Foreign policy is to help mobilize society, and not distract it from the main goal of economic, scientific and technological revival. It should help develop the country along the promising

track for the coming 5-10 years—the southeastern on, and not let it be distracted to other projects, either costly or promising little or no return.

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