

Summer 2005

Connections

The Quarterly Journal

*Russia and
the "Orange
Revolution"*

*NATO and
the Second
Gulf War*

*Post-Conflict
Rehabilitation*

*Iran's
Nuclear
Program*

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Russia's Perception and Hierarchy of Security Threats

Dmitry Polikanov *

As Russian President Vladimir Putin enters his second term and Russia embarks on the course toward modernization (some experts would call it authoritarian modernization, though), the country is approaching an important phase in its development. The general message sent by the modernization process is the end of the transition period in Russian politics and economy, which will require the formulation of new tasks for the future. Among them, it will be necessary to reassess Russia's place in the world and to see how to ensure the country's competitiveness (a fashionable word for the Russian establishment) in the global arena. Therefore, the Russian perception of security threats becomes a subject of extreme importance.

Meanwhile, all the major conceptual documents behind the modernization process were approved as long ago as 2000—i.e., before the major shifts in international relations that have taken place in the past five years. At the time of their elaboration, the authors did their best to predict the trends of global development and tried to make the formulas as abstract as possible. Somehow, they succeeded in grasping some of the prevailing tendencies (e.g., NATO's use of force beyond the traditional areas of responsibility and without authorization of the UN Security Council) and in foreseeing, for example, the increasing influence of the international terrorist threat on the world's security situation. This has helped to preserve the relevance of certain elements of Russia's National Security Concept and Military Doctrine. However, as usual, the interpretation was more important than the facts and, regrettably, the perception contained in the 2000 doctrines is partly outdated today and contains certain hints of Cold War thinking.

The 2000 National Security Concept gives a broad vision of Russian national security interests and the key factors affecting them. It starts with economic security issues, and clearly emphasizes the importance of the downgrading of the Russian economy, and especially its technological potential, its evident orientation on the export of raw materials and fuel, the stagnation of the agriculture and banking sectors, and the brain drain that has resulted in technological dependence. The World Bank report on Russia's development issued in 2004 indicates that not much has changed since then, and predicts that the influence of energy export will only increase in the foreseeable future. This will not only be connected with high oil prices, but also with the government's need for extra resources to implement Putin's presidential ambitions (doubling of the GDP by 2010, and cutting poverty in half in the next three years) and the lack of alternative sources of revenue other than export duties and taxation on oil and gas.

The social threats highlighted in the report include uncontrolled migration, secessionism and economic disintegration of the state, diminishments in the effectiveness of the legal system, depreciation of spiritual values, extremism, the worsening crime

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situation, and corruption. Another factor is the growing gap between the rich and the poor and the degradation of the health care and social security systems, as well as increasing drug and alcohol consumption and huge demographic problems. Again, most of these threats remain topical today.

Putin's efforts to strengthen the vertical orientation of power have led to more centralization of the country and the elimination of secessionist sentiments. His plenipotentiary envoys in federal districts have succeeded in bringing local legislation into compliance with the Russian Constitution and, hence, have consolidated the legal space of the nation. Nonetheless, the poverty problem is one of the most urgent for present-day Russia, where a large share of the population (up to 30 million people) lives below the poverty level. Crime and corruption have become even more urgent issues than they were in 2000, which has resulted in various initiatives: the establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Committee under the auspices of the president in early 2004; the administrative reform aimed at making the criminal justice system more transparent and "technologically savvy"; the Ethical Code developed by the Russian business community; the anti-corruption examination of all bills in the Duma, etc. Finally, the problems of drugs and demography are taking on threatening forms and require immediate solutions. Nonetheless, the Anti-Drug Committee set up in spring 2003 is still in the process of settling down to business and has yet to achieve significant results. Meanwhile, the worsening demographic situation in the Far East makes it more vulnerable to external threats and may provoke secessionist sentiments in the long term.

The 2000 Concept divides additional threats into three categories: international, military, and border. The classification is not perfect and creates some confusion, but such flaws of the structure do not have a negative impact on the text of the document, which is quite logical in its narration. Most of the international threats have come to pass, and it is not clear how Russia still survives under such conditions. This would seem to imply that the way these priorities and threats are formulated is somewhat distant from reality, since these threats are not so vitally detrimental to Russia's security after all.

The attempts of some states to diminish the role of international institutions, including the UN and OSCE, have succeeded. Russia's political, economic, and military influence in the world continues to decrease. Military blocs keep strengthening, and NATO enlarges toward the east without any serious objections from the Russian side. Foreign military bases and large contingents near the Russian borders have become a reality in the world, which is busy waging the war on terror. Moreover, the United States is enhancing its military capabilities in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan are recent examples), as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. Weakening integration processes in the CIS have transformed this organization into a discussion forum, rather than a fully functioning body capable of defending Russia's economic and political interests. The escalation of conflicts near Russia's borders and the external borders of the CIS is more or less over, though the issue of Afghanistan is still of some importance from the point of view of drug trafficking and its potential to cause further instability in Central Asia. Fortunately, there are no

territorial claims, but some states continue to “resist Russia’s strengthening and diminish its positions” in various parts of the world. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has turned into the top security problem confronting the country. Terrorism, especially international terrorist activities, has also arisen to the top of the security agenda. The domination of some states in global information space and the development of information warfare techniques have not abated, and Russia is still squeezed out of this process.

In the military sphere, NATO and “coalitions of the willing” expand the scope of their operations beyond their traditional areas of responsibility and without the sanction of UN Security Council resolutions. The technological gap in the military realm is increasing, and Russia is falling behind in the modernization of its armed forces. The threat of intensified activities of foreign intelligence services is a “ghost” of the Cold War, but recent trials indicate that some parts of the elite, including *siloviki* (notably the FSB), are still serious about this security challenge.

Border threats also failed to disappear. The economic, demographic, and cultural expansion of states that border Russian territory takes the form of the “Chinese threat”; there can be no other explanation today (although in 2000 the authors might have meant the expansion of Western values as well). Cross-border organized crime and activities of foreign terrorist organizations are on the rise, and nowadays require a military response, according to the Defense Minister.

The 2000 Military Doctrine maintains that the level of direct military threat in its traditional forms has become quite low. At the same time, the document is even more sodden with Cold War formulas and perceptions, but also takes into account the Chechen war experience. Among external threats to Russian security it names territorial claims, interference of other states in internal affairs, and attempts to ignore Russia’s interests in international security and Russia’s strengthening as an influential center in a multi-polar world. The emergence of hotbeds of armed conflict near Russia’s borders and the military buildup of international security formations as well as their expansion work to the detriment of the security of the country as well. Another issue is the deployment of foreign troops on the territories of states that neighbor and are friendly to Russia, in violation of the UN Charter. The document names such threats as training, equipping, and operating armed formations in the adjacent states that may be used against Russia; intelligence activities; discrimination against Russian citizens and their legitimate interests abroad; and international terrorism. Domestic threats, according to the Russian military, include attempts to overthrow the constitutional government, the existence of extremist, separatist, nationalist, religious, and terrorist movements, which may affect the territorial integrity and stability of the country; the emergence of illegal armed formations and attacks against infrastructure; illicit trafficking in arms; and, finally, organized crime connected with terrorism and smuggling.

It can be seen that most of these formulas are based on preserving the principle of national sovereignty and protecting Russia against interference in its internal affairs on the part of other states, notably Western states. A significant component of the document is the list of threats connected with the activities of armed formations and extremist and terrorist movements. This was a step forward resulting from the Chechen

experience, which also helped Russia to fit into framework of the “war on terror” system quite painlessly.

Three years later, after the events of September 11, the hostage-taking in the Moscow theater, and the war in Iraq, the Russian military decided to update their basic doctrines and presented in fall 2003 a document outlining the “Actual Tasks of the Armed Forces.” This “White Book” of the Russian Defense Ministry did not go too much beyond the list of threats mentioned above (it seems that many of them were just copied and pasted from the previous documents), but it altered the list of priorities.

First of all, the document mentions the growing importance for today’s security climate of WMD proliferation, terrorism, ethnic and religious radical movements, drug trafficking, and organized crime. It also claims again that the level of direct military threat is low, and that no conflict outside Russia currently poses a substantial threat to its stability. Moreover, the military argued that they took into account the changes in the global environment and excluded from their planning considerations the probability of global nuclear war or large-scale conventional wars with NATO or U.S.-led coalitions.

Among other important postulates is the reassessment of the role of the armed forces. They should no longer limit themselves to containing external threats, as Chechnya has shown the power of international terrorism and the interconnections between external and internal threats. Second, the armed forces should play a more active role in protecting Russia’s economic interests (the Caspian Fleet is one of the examples), as most of the conflicts and interventions today concern specific economic matters and business interests. Third, the Russian armed forces recognize the danger of the transformation of nuclear arms into a battlefield weapon. However, this leads to a Cold War conclusion—namely, let’s continue to rely on and upgrade our strategic deterrence potential. Fourth, the paper tends to focus on constructing a central role for the Ministry of Defense in coordinating the security activities of the state, which is caused by the personal ambitions of Sergei Ivanov. The Russian Defense Minister keeps concentrating power in his hands, and the changes in the government in spring 2004 helped him to transform the Ministry into one of the richest agencies in the Russian government—a real power “monster machine” in the Russian system.

The document also differentiates between external, internal, and cross-border threats, which is a more streamlined classification system in comparison with the past. Key external threats (among some of the mantras of the past) include the interference of foreign states and coalitions in internal affairs (lessons learned from Kosovo and Iraq), instability in neighboring countries caused by weakness of central governments, and the development of WMD programs by states, coalitions, or political movements.

While the first priority is hardly applicable in the Russian case, and seems an example of “tilting at windmills,” two others certainly reflect the realities of the modern world. The problem of the low level of legitimacy of the regimes in the post-Soviet space, under these circumstances, is of particular importance to Moscow (witness recent developments in Kyrgyzstan). Somehow it seems that the Kremlin tends to focus on “consolidating” the regimes, even if they are non-democratic, as a part of its strategy to maintain its influence in the region. This in fact contradicts the U.S. and EU

strategy in the region, and thus creates potential tensions in the relations of Russia with these global actors.

As for some new accents, aside from traditional apprehensions about military buildup near the borders and enlargement of military blocs, one may mention the change in formula concerning the deployment of foreign troops on the territory of friendly states. It became more assertive, and includes not only the requirement for the sanction of the UN Security Council, but also Russia's approval. Besides, Moscow pays more attention now to the protection of rights and freedoms of Russian citizens abroad, especially with respect to the recent clashes with Latvia about educational reform. The military also added the threat of hampering Russia's access to strategically important communications, which might be a link with Russian interests in the Caspian and Caucasus regions.

The list of internal threats did not undergo significant changes. Violent change of the constitutional government and threats to territorial integrity, training and equipping of illegal armed formations, and illicit trafficking in arms remain the top priorities. But the analysts have supplemented the list with the growing threat of organized crime (when it reaches a scale where it threatens the security of a constituent entity of the Russian Federation).

Finally, the Russian military is preparing to face cross-border threats, the importance of which will increase, according to their predictions. The cross-border challenges, which are external in nature but internal in form, include the activities of international terrorist organizations on Russian territory (clearly drawing on the Chechen experience), as well as their training and equipping on the territory of other states. Besides, as we have already mentioned the economization of the Russian threat perception, Moscow draws special attention to cross-border crime, including smuggling, which requires military enforcement and support to be provided to the border patrol (particularly in the cases of Tajikistan and Georgia). Hostile information activities and drug trafficking has also shifted to these spheres as well.

As for priorities at the regional level, Central Asia and the so-called "Southern direction" are the most important in terms of ensuring Russia's security. Moscow is especially concerned about the situation in Afghanistan in this respect. Nonetheless, the "Western direction" and "Far Eastern direction" are mentioned more specifically from the point of view of potential operations, which can lead one to believe that the General Staff is still looking for adversaries in the wrong places (this is confirmed by the anti-NATO rhetoric of the doctrine and the recent waves of dissatisfaction about NATO enlargement and the expansion of military infrastructure to the Baltic states). The recent warnings of the Defense Minister to Western countries that enter Russia's traditional zone of influence also falls into this pile of old arguments.

One cannot blame the Russian analysts for the shape of this general list of threats, since many of them stem from the history of Russia and her traditional concerns. However, one has to conclude that many of the security challenges are far less visible than others that are not at the top of the list and which the armed forces and other security agencies should be ready to address.

There are clear discrepancies in the hierarchy of threats as far as the political leadership and the military are concerned. While the president and his team are more willing to focus on more realistic tasks, such as “soft” security matters (organized crime, corruption, drug trafficking) and cooperative approaches (for example, the interaction between the Collective Security Treaty Organization and NATO on this matter), the military remains quite obstinate in promoting the “hard” security agenda (the CFE Treaty is a good example). What unites both is the recognition of the threat posed by terrorism to Russia’s security, and the tough approach that is suggested in solving this problem.

Unfortunately, one may predict that, as Moscow drifts toward “modernization,” the executive branch will have to look for the ideology to support the reforms (though President Putin seems to be a classical unideological bureaucrat). People support the meanings embodied in the reforms, but not the ideological trappings with which they have been draped (sharing negative feelings towards “communism” or “democracy,” while having more positive responses toward “order,” “stability,” etc.). This ideological justification will probably be some form of conservative nationalism, bearing in mind Russia’s domestic developments (VCIOM’s March 2004 poll indicates that “non-Russians” elicit the highest negative feelings among a range of suggested terms). In this case, Russia may continue its drift to reasserting its status as a Great Power (based in nationalistic competitiveness), and will be more focused on hard security and strengthening its outdated armed forces. Such a geopolitical agenda focused on hard security issues may hamper Russia’s integration into the club of the leading nations of the world, and hence diminish its role in global decision-making. Moreover, Russia’s clumsy attempts to expand its influence in the post-Soviet space seem to work in the same direction, and result in clashes of interests with the U.S. and Europe.

When it comes to public perceptions, they mostly coincide with the apprehensions of the elite. Russia has passed a complicated period in its history, when its foreign and security policy was widely separated from the aspirations of the population. People highly praise President Putin for his foreign policy activities, and are far less critical on these issues than on his domestic political agenda. VCIOM’s poll of February 2004 indicates that 61 percent of the Russian public believes that international terrorism is the most significant threat to Russia’s security. In fact, the overwhelming majority named terrorist acts in Moscow and the North Caucasus as one of the key events of 2003. Almost 23 percent assume that the growing gap between rich and poor countries and the increasing military-political influence of the United States are two other sources of instability. It is striking that 17 percent fear a new world war due to the growing instability in the world, while 16 percent are afraid of the increasing influence of the Islamic world. WMD proliferation and the global economic crisis posed by the depreciating dollar are important for only 12–13 percent of the respondents.

At the same time, people are quite pragmatic in assessing the process of NATO enlargement and the worsening of relations with former Soviet republics, which are placed at the bottom of their list of priorities. As a matter of fact, only 35 percent still regard NATO as an aggressive bloc threatening Russia’s security, though more Russians (44 percent) are concerned with NATO enlargement. The number of those op-

posed to any military blocs is growing; people are becoming increasingly pragmatic, and do not want to take on any extra obligations. As for the former Soviet states, most of the Russians (61 percent) are against any domination of Moscow over these countries, and are critical of their government for its inability to improve relations in this regard. Only 5 percent believe in the danger of a powerful China (this is a typical percentage, actually, as other polls show), and this coincides with the perception of the military, who prefer to engage China through the Shanghai Organization of Cooperation and other mechanisms.

Thus, one may conclude that Russia's perception of threats is becoming more advanced and closer to the realities of the modern world. However, Russia's affection for hard security matters may move it further away from the European agenda. It will also prevent rapprochement with the United States, as Russia formally keeps condemning the use of force without the authorization of the UN Security Council (though, if its interests required it, Moscow would be ready to proceed with such strikes). The reminiscences of the Great Power syndrome (in the FSU zone) and the legacy of the Cold War (opposition to NATO) will further hamper Russian integration into processes of global decision-making. They may deflect Russia from solving its genuine problems and promoting real modernization of its armed forces. Finally, one has to remember the existing gap between Russia's capabilities and its aspirations to meet present-day security challenges, including the threat of terrorism. Therefore, Russia has to rethink its old concepts and develop some new conceptual approaches, free from traditional fears that at this point are largely chimeras. The renewed Russian Security Council, headed now by ex-Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, may become the appropriate body for such new thinking (though its present composition does not thus far allow for meeting such challenging tasks). True reassessment of Russia's national interests and threats will help Moscow to ensure continued progress toward modernization and become genuinely competitive on the world arena without confrontation.