

STRATEGIC FOREIGN POLICY GOALS OF RUSSIA REGARDING THE USA, EU, CHINA AND UKRAINE'S PARTNER STATES (POLAND, THE BALTIC COUNTRIES)

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The analytical material examines Russia's foreign policy strategy towards the USA, EU, China, the Baltic States, and Poland. It analyzes its conceptual foundations, main practical aspects, and provides an assessment of its prospects and trends in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Introduction

The decision to begin full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become the culmination of the efforts of the current leadership of the Russian Federation to accelerate the change in the world order and to restore Russia's geopolitical influence lost after the collapse of the USSR. The essence of Moscow's revisionism lies in an attempt to challenge the West led by the USA, which, in Russia's view, has lost the ability to lead the processes of globalization based on liberal-democratic principles. This is compounded by the crisis of international legal institutions and the weakness of global institutions in responding to security challenges. Russia actively uses the narrative of the need for broader involvement of other actors who are dynamically increasing their own economic, scientific-technological, and military-technical capabilities. The result of this should be a deepening rift and contradictions between prominent actors and regional alliances of the Global South and key Western states.

This is accompanied by Russia's actual rejection of its civilizational and cultural orientation towards the West (especially Europe), which was set in the 18th century and lasted, with a relative interruption during the Soviet period, for over 300 years.

The purpose of this article is to formulate an understanding of Russia's strategic foreign policy goals towards the USA, EU, and China, as leading geopolitical actors, as well as

towards Ukraine's partners in Central and Eastern Europe – Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which have direct land borders with the Russian Federation and an ally of the aggressor state – Belarus.

Conceptual Vision of the Strategic Goals of the Russia's Foreign Policy

The Great War against Ukraine cemented in the foreign policy strategy of the Russian Federation a specific vision of the transformation of international relations, which contained an eclectic combination of realistic, civilizational, and world-system approaches along with imperialistic-messianic ideas of the "Russian world". According to this discourse, in the "hierarchical" system of international relations that emerged after the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations, an "irreversible" transition to a "multipolar" order based on the interaction of "states-civilizations" must occur¹. At the same time, the general motive is intertwined with the concept of the "clash of civilizations", in which the collective West as a "global minority" must yield to the dominance of the "global majority", by which official Moscow understands the states of the Indo-Pacific region, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. These regions will have the right to internal development according to their own "non-imposed from the outside" vision, which differs from the model of liberal democracies and will constitute "true strategic sovereignty" – a specific Russian interpretation of a non-liberal domestic political system of the state.

The concept of "states-civilizations" essentially contains the possibility of imposing one's own version of socio-political development on other states². In the context of this discourse, Russia as an active member of the "global majority" and the most important geopolitical and military actor should be at the forefront of "liberating" the world, including, in particular, Europe and Japan, from the "hegemony" of the United States³.

The United States

In the new paradigm of Russia's foreign policy, the USA is the main strategic rival, which, together with its allies, embodies the "empire of lies"⁴, the hegemony of which needs to be destroyed in the new world order. In the new Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian

¹ Барабанов О., Бордачёв Т., Лукьянов Ф. Аттестат зрелости, или Порядок, какого ещё не было : Фантазия о будущем без иерархии. Доклад международного дискуссионного клуба Валдай. 2023. Окт. 32 с. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/reports/attestat-zrelosti-2023/>

² Sherr J., Gretskiy I. Why Russia went to war: A three-dimensional perspective. *International Centre for Defence and Security*. 2023, Jan., 14 p., https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/01/ICDS_Analysis_Why-Russia_Went_to_War_James_Sherr_Igor_Gretskiy_January_2023_EDIT.pdf

³ Тренин Д. Не «против», а «за»: Политика России в отношении Мирового большинства. *Россия в глобальной политике*. 01.09.2023. <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ne-protiv-a-za/>

⁴ Обращение президента России к нации от 24.02.2022 о начале специальной военной операции. https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Обращение_президента_России_к_нации_от_24.02.2022_о_начале_специальной_военной_операции

Federation, adopted on March 31, 2023, official Moscow declares readiness for dialogue and cooperation with the West on the condition of "ending confrontational policies" and "hegemonic ambitions", as well as accepting the "realities of a multipolar world" and returning to "pragmatic interaction" with Russia based on "sovereign equality" and respect for each other's interests. At the same time, Russia retains the possibility to "defend its right to existence by all available means"⁵.

In the medium and long term, Russia seeks to prevent the US influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States and to push it out of the Central and Eastern Europe states. Official Moscow prescribed similar requirements in the ultimatum to the US and NATO, set out in the drafts of the agreement with the US on security guarantees and the agreement with NATO on measures to ensure the security of Russia dated December 15, 2021. Thus, Russia demanded that the US and its NATO allies refrain from further expanding the Alliance, cancel the decision of the 2008 Bucharest Summit regarding the potential membership of Ukraine and Georgia in NATO, and legally commit the US and other Alliance states to refrain from deploying offensive weapons on the border with Russia⁶⁷.

In practical terms, Russia is trying to pursue a strategy of "raising the stakes" by seeking out and exploiting the weaknesses of the US position:

1. **Direct or indirect provocation of escalation in regional conflicts**, creating the risk of confrontation between major actors. Russia demonstratively supports anti-Western politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia who advocate for a de facto revision of borders in the former Yugoslavia and the forcible return of Kosovo under Serbia's sovereignty. Indirect evidence regarding the presence of certain types of weapons and tactics suggests Russia's possible assistance in the preparation of the October 7, 2023, attack by HAMAS groups on cities in Israel near the border with the Gaza Strip. According to the American media, representatives of the PMC Wagner plan to transfer Pantsir-S1 air defense systems to Hezbollah.
2. **"Nuclear blackmail"** articulated by the leadership of the Russian Federation, as well as the placing of Strategic Deterrence Forces on heightened readiness, the deployment of elements of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, the mining of objects at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, and directing the flight of strike assets over

⁵ Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации. Утверждена Указом президента Российской Федерации от 31 марта 2023 г. №229. <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d447a0ce9f5a96bdc3.pdf>

⁶ Договор между Российской Федерацией и Соединенными Штатами Америки о гарантиях безопасности. Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации. 17.12.2021. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/

⁷ Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического договора. Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации. 17.12.2021. <https://mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1790803/>

nuclear facilities in Ukraine⁸. In its propaganda rhetoric, Russia consistently tries to present aggression against Ukraine as a direct confrontation with the US and its NATO allies. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Russian leadership has threatened to use weapons of mass destruction against any third country that tries to help Ukraine.

3. **Withdrawal or suspension of participation in agreements on strategic parity, conventional arms, and strengthening trust in security.** Russia consistently blackmails the US with the cessation of bilateral and multilateral agreements regulating the issue of nuclear deterrence buildup. For example, on February 21, 2023, Russia suspended its participation in the INF Treaty and continues to cast doubt on the possibility of its extension⁹. On October 17, 2023, the State Duma of Russia supported in the first reading the withdrawal of ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.
4. **An attempt to form coalitions with strategic rivals or openly hostile states towards the US.** The full-scale invasion has accelerated Russia's course towards the activation of foreign policy contacts and strategic rapprochement with states that espouse anti-Americanism or seek to challenge the US as a global hegemon or influential regional actor (China, Iran, North Korea, Syria, etc.).
5. **An attempt to revise the current system of world trade and the financial system.** Russia seeks to promote ideas of "de-dollarization" of the system of mutual settlements, particularly in the trade of mineral resources, including natural gas and oil.

The leadership of Russia continues to suspect Washington of attempting internal political destabilization and forcible regime change in Russia and its allied states. This suspicion is linked, in particular, to the virtually complete destruction of organized forms of non-systemic opposition and media in Russia, significant terms of imprisonment for prominent opposition leaders, and so on. In this context, Russia provides political-diplomatic, financial-economic, and military support to the leadership of certain states, mostly with authoritarian regimes, in case of internal political challenges (the participation of the Russian contingent in the civil war in Syria since 2015 and support for stability within the CSTO contingent mission in Kazakhstan in January 2022).

⁸ Див. Тищенко К. «Енергоатом» показав проліт російської ракети над АЕС. *Українська правда*. 2022. 5 черв. URL: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/06/5/7350693/>; Васильчук В. Поблизу Хмельницької АЕС пролетіли дві крилаті ракети – Енергоатом. *Суспільне Новини*. 2022. 25 квіт. URL: <https://suspihne.media/231909-poblizu-hmelnickoi-aes-proletili-dvi-krilatiraketi-energoatom/>

⁹ Faulconbridge G. Russia warns United States: the end of nuclear arms control may be nigh. *Reuters*. 2023. 30 Jan. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-nuclear-arms-treaty-with-us-may-end-after-2026-2023-01-30/>

At the same time, despite the high level of tension, Russia and the United States maintain political-diplomatic contacts and communication related to the observance of parity in strategic arms.

The European Union

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked the effective cessation of practical cooperation between Russia and the EU institutions. Russia focused on seeking interaction with bloc states on a bilateral level. For Russia, mechanisms for reaching compromise decisions, delegating sovereignty to supranational institutions, and considering the positions of smaller states were seen more as signs of weakness. Thus, Russia sought to influence the EU decisions through the largest and most influential states, including France, Germany, and Italy, relegating the importance of other member states, especially those more skeptical about cooperation with Russia¹⁰.

At the same time, Russia actively stimulated anti-Western and Eurosceptic sentiments within a number of EU member states and countries aspiring to membership in the bloc. Despite the significant toxicity of relations with Russia, the Russian leadership expresses confidence in having its "friends" in Europe¹¹. The political and economic interdependence between Russia and individual EU member states has allowed official Moscow to instrumentalize these ties to deepen contradictions and divisions within the bloc. Governments of Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria play a special role in this regard, openly supporting a course of reconciliation with Russia.

Key representatives of the Hungarian leadership maintain active contacts with the Russian leadership. Formally, Budapest justifies its interaction with Moscow by economic interdependence. Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto visited Moscow four times on official visits after the start of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. The strengthening of contacts with Russia is accompanied by pro-Russian rhetoric about the impossibility of Ukraine's victory on the battlefield, the de-subjectivization of Ukraine, and the "suppression of rights" of ethnic minorities in Ukraine, citing the example of the Hungarian ethnic community in the Transcarpathian region. Hungary consistently blocks the approval of the EU financial support for Ukraine. Official Budapest has not abandoned plans to build a nuclear power plant in cooperation with Rosatom, and has lobbied for the lifting of sanctions against a number of representatives of the Russian oligarchy and officials.

¹⁰ Meister S. A Paradigm Shift: EU-Russia Relations After the War in Ukraine. *Carnegie Europe*. 2022. Nov. 29. URL: <https://camegieurope.eu/2022/11/29/paradigm-shift-eu-russia-relations-after-war-in-ukraine-pub-88476>

¹¹ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6253354>

Attempts to focus on the EU's internal agenda will also entail less enthusiasm for financing the reconstruction of Ukraine¹².

Russia continues to hope to maintain channels for the export of natural gas and oil to EU countries. However, Russia has effectively lost the ability to use gas and oil exports as a tool to influence the decisions of leading EU countries, especially after the cessation of operations of Nord Stream-1 due to the explosion on September 26, 2022, and the sanctions imposed on Nord Stream-2, as well as the EU's restrictions on oil and oil product imports (introduction of price caps), and the likelihood of further embargoes on the purchase of Russian liquefied natural gas. According to Eurostat, as of the end of the second quarter of 2023, Russia accounted for 2.7% of EU oil imports and 13.8% of natural gas imports. Russia remains a significant exporter of liquefied natural gas to the EU, accounting for 12.4% of supplies during the same period (second only to the United States at 46.6%)¹³.

China

The increase in confrontation with the West has pushed Russia to seek support from non-Western actors. Russia's strategic "turn to the East", which began in the late 1990s and developed in the 2010s, primarily involved closer ties with China. During the period of political-diplomatic escalation with the West preceding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia actively sought principled support from China. The joint statement issued during the meeting on February 4, 2022, in Beijing between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, reflects a shared vision of changing world order and mutual support for each other's actions in regions of their strategic interests. Russia agreed with China's position on the situation in the Indo-Pacific region, while China condemned any plans for NATO expansion.

China's neutral position regarding aggression against Ukraine generally aligns with Russia's interests. The mission of former Chinese Ambassador to Russia Li Hui in May 2023 contributed to the dissemination of certain ideas that correspond to the position of the Russian leadership, such as "mutual respect for interests of states" and the territorial integrity of Ukraine without principled demands for the withdrawal of Russian occupation forces from the occupied territories in the south and east of Ukraine.

In the short to medium term, China will remain a convenient partner for Russia in public communication and advancing frameworks of a shared vision for a post-American world order. At the global level, one of such projects will be the expansion and deepening of

¹² Kudzko A. The Slovak Election and Its Ramifications for European Foreign Policy. *Camegie Europe*. 2023. Sep. 14. <https://camegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/90555>

¹³ EU imports of energy products continued to drop in Q2 2023. *Eurostat*. 2023. 25 Sept. URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230925-1#:~:text=This%20reduction%20could%20have%20been,the%20second%20quarter%20of%202023>

multilateral cooperation within BRICS, to which Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates joined on January 1, 2024.

Russia is demonstrating readiness to deepen its activities and expand multilateral regional formats, in which China also participates. However, the formation of the declared "Greater Eurasia" format by the Russian leadership, which combines Russia's integration projects (EAEU, CSTO) with China's initiatives (Belt and Road Initiative, SCO), remains an unrealized idea. Among Russian analytical circles, there is a promoted idea of further strengthening relations within the "Russia-China-Iran" triangle¹⁴. Despite the lack of normative foundations, this "axis" is effectively becoming an alliance. Pressure on one of the participants in the "axis" further pushes for cooperation within its framework.

China has become one of the main suppliers of high-tech products to Russia, including technologies of "dual use" that are important for the military-industrial complex, as well as a key market for the export of mineral resources from Russia, especially after the gradual loss of the EU market. Russia has become one of the key suppliers of pipeline gas to China (33.5 billion cubic meters by the end of 2023)¹⁵, oil (97.5 million tons during January-November 2023)¹⁶, and coal (76.5 million tons during January-September 2023, with an expected total annual volume of 100 million tons)¹⁷.

In the long term, increasing trade, economic, and geostrategic dependence on China could pose significant risks for Russia itself. Already, the focus and strategic efforts on aggression against Ukraine and confrontation with the West have led to a restrained reaction from Russia to the growing influence of China on the CIS countries, which have formal alliance relations with official Moscow and are within its sphere of influence – Belarus and the Central Asian states.

Poland and the Baltic countries

Russia openly demonstrates its desire to bring back into its sphere of influence the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, among which the Baltic countries and Poland play a key role. Potential expansion of control in the Baltic Sea region would give Russia significant opportunities to weaken NATO's dominant role and exert military-political pressure on the

¹⁴ Тренин Д. Не «против», а «за»: Политика России в отношении Мирового большинства. *Россия в глобальной политике*. 01.09.2023. URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ne-protiv-a-za/>

¹⁵ Китай получит российского газа больше плана. *EurAsia Daily*. 2023. 28 дек. URL: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2023/12/28/kitay-poluchit-rossiyskogo-gaza-bolshe-plana> ; для порівняння щорічний обсяг поставчань природного газу через трубопровід «Туркменістан - Китай» складає бл. 55 млрд. куб. м.

¹⁶ <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/5576314/index.html> ; це найвищий показник, для порівняння – об'єм експорту нафти до КНР із Саудівської Аравії протягом аналогічного періоду склав 80 млрд. т, а Іраку – 54,1 млрд. т.

¹⁷ В Минэнерго ждут роста экспорта российского угля в Китай в 2023 году в 1,5 раза. *Интерфакс*. 2023. 20 ноябр. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/931288>

bloc's member states in the future. This region plays a key role in Russia's external trade activities. For example, through its own ports in the Baltic Sea (mostly in the Leningrad Oblast), Russia conducts about 57% of its oil exports¹⁸. In the future, broader control over the ice-free ports of the Baltic region could strengthen Russia's ability to project its influence on the Northern and Western European regions. Thus, Russia potentially has the ability to use tactics employed during its large-scale invasion of Ukraine, including hindering free commercial navigation and attempting to damage energy or communication infrastructure¹⁹.

Russia's propaganda consistently de-subjectivizes the Baltic states and criticizes them for their high geopolitical dependence on the US. Russia has a specific goal of displacing NATO's military presence from the territory of the Baltic Sea region. Furthermore, Russia has the ability to use military or hybrid instruments to achieve such goals, which would also test the unity of NATO member states, particularly in implementing Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The territories of the Baltic states are relatively small. In the event of a potential Russian invasion, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would not have the strategic depth similar to that of Ukraine. This would lead to a significant loss of control over their own sovereign territory and difficulties in regrouping and counterattacking by the forces of these three states²⁰. A key role in implementing this potential scenario is played by the accelerated military construction of Russia in the border areas with the Baltic states and Poland, including the Kaliningrad Oblast, as well as Belarus. The military-political leadership of Russia has decided to divide the Western Military District into the Leningrad and Moscow districts and to create new military formations within these specified military-administrative units.

By 2022, Russia sought to instrumentalize its policy regarding the rights of the Russian ethnic minority²¹ and historical memory, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, to increase internal political tension in these countries, encourage irredentist sentiments, shape a negative image of these states in the West, and potentially use hybrid subversive tactics, as was done during the attempt to annex the Crimean Peninsula and the outbreak of the war in the Eastern Ukraine in 2014. However, these efforts proved to be ineffective: a significant majority of the Russian ethnic population in Estonia and Latvia, especially the youth and middle-aged citizens, generally supported their governments' pro-Ukrainian positions;

¹⁸ Westgaard K. The Baltic Sea Region: A Laboratory for Overcoming European Security Challenges. *Carnegie Endowment for Peace*. 2023. Dec. 21. URL: <https://camegieendowment.org/2023/12/21/baltic-sea-region-laboratory-for-overcoming-european-security-challenges-pub-91312>

¹⁹ Bruns S. From "Flooded Meadow" to Maritime Hotspot: Keeping the Baltic Sea Free, Open, and Interconnected. *Carnegie Endowment for Peace*. 2023. Dec. 20. URL: <https://camegieendowment.org/2023/12/20/from-flooded-meadow-to-maritime-hotspot-keeping-baltic-sea-free-open-and-interconnected-pub-91303>

²⁰ Hartwell L., Rakštytė A., Ryng J., Selga, Ē.K. Winter is coming: the Baltics and the Russia-Ukraine war : Implications and Policy Recommendations. *LSE Ideas*. 2022. Dec. P.21. URL: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/2022-12-05-BalticRussia-FINALweb.pdf>

²¹ Brauß H., Rác A. Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region. *German Council on Foreign Relations*. 2021. Jan. №1. P.16. URL: https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/210107_Report-2021-1-EN.pdf

Latvia became one of the key platforms for Russian opposition media²²; the Baltic states and Poland have definitively ceased further purchases of energy resources from Russia. For example, Lithuania became the first EU country to completely halt the import of oil and gas from Russia; the Baltic states are gradually disconnecting from the power supply system from Russia; and by the end of 2025, they plan to fully synchronize their own electricity supply system with the EU²³.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Escalation of confrontation with the West, "raising the stakes" in relations with the US, attempting to provoke a rift in the transatlantic community, and expanding influence in Central and Eastern Europe, along with the low prospects for significant success in the war against Ukraine, diminish Russia's ability to assert itself as a sovereign actor that could become a separate pole of power due to increasing systemic dependence on China.
2. A change in Russia's strategic course is only possible with increased levels of economic and scientific-technical isolation, significant strategic differences in interests between Russia and its situational allies, primarily China and Iran, and a significant threat of losing occupied territories during hostilities in Ukraine. Such trends will contribute to the Russian elite's demand to review confrontational rhetoric and the need to reach compromises with the West, including on the withdrawal of occupation forces from Ukraine's territory and the repeal of Russia's internal legislation regarding the status of currently occupied regions of Ukraine.
3. The relevant central authorities of Ukraine should communicate with the EU member states and institutions, as well as with the G7 countries, to convey signals that any attempts to reintegrate Russia into the processes of building global and European regional security "on equal terms" after the completion of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine will only exacerbate the resentment of Russia's political elites and parts of its population. Long-term peace with Russia is possible only through its democratization, demilitarization, and decolonization, along with promoting processes of democratization, socio-economic, and security stability in the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia as potential objects of Russia's military-political expansion.

²² Shtepa V. Kremlin's War Against Ukraine Divides Russians in the Baltics. *The Jamestown Foundation*. 2022. Apr. 14. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/kremlins-war-against-ukraine-divides-russians-in-the-baltics/>

²³ Westgaard K., Ibidem.

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