



RUSSIA IN A CHANGING WORLD: FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

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The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, which was approved by President Vladimir Putin's executive order dated November 30, 2016, is a compact and balanced policy document reflecting the “philosophy covering the basic principles, priority areas of focus and goals and objectives of foreign policy of the Russian Federation.” The fundamental principles of foreign policy such as pragmatism, multi-vector approach and openness in promoting national interests are once again enshrined in the Concept. Russia is pursuing an ideology-free foreign policy that is guided by clearly articulated national interests, which invokes traditional and classical diplomacy and, thereby, ensures the Russian factor's predictability in global politics, of course, for someone whose outlook on the world is likewise devoid of any kind of ideological distortion of the real state of affairs in the modern world.

Moscow sees the international situation as a process of continuing evolution/transformation, whose pace has been picking up in recent years, rather than something frozen, a dogma or an endless status quo. Among other things, this stems from the aftermath of the Cold War, which failed to play out in its own time and was postponed due to a number of reasons, primarily, as a function of the outlook on the world which saw the “end of history,” that is, the competitive environment inherent in the former system of “capitalism-socialism” ideological paradigm. This is what the endgame of the entire transitional 30-year era following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which we are now witnessing, is all about. The time is ripe to resume traditional competition that is based, primarily, on national development, and to leave behind all kinds of imperial modes of existence. Russia has done its part, and the ball is now in the court of the



United States/the historical West. Hence the need to constantly update assessments of the developments related to Russia as they unfold.

Global affairs are marked by uncertainty, the situation remains tessellated, contradictory and volatile, and new challenges have become increasingly pressing; moreover, game-changing situations sometimes arise that complicate the strategic planning efforts. For example, who could have predicted in the lead up to 2020 that the nation states' ability to act as suppliers of global epidemiological security and to effectively address pandemic-related challenges to their development would become a key variable of the nation states' global status? However, here, too, we are not talking about a radical overhaul or revision of the Concept, but about emphasising the document's programme guidelines to match specific circumstances.

These programme guidelines focus on addressing priority goals, such as ensuring national security, including economic and environmental security, in a new broader interpretation, creating the most favourable environment to ensure Russia's successful internal development and sustainable economic growth, as well as steadily promoting Russia's role as a global power that exerts major influence on the formation of a polycentric international order based on accounting for and respecting the interests of everyone without exception and indivisibility of security amid a surge in interdependence of all nation states.

Thus, the fact that Russia was ahead of others in beginning to structure its foreign policy around advanced global development trends, such as de-globalisation and regionalisation, the growing role of identity and history, as well as self-sufficiency, which by no means precludes openness to broad international cooperation based on equality and mutual



consideration and respect for one another's interests, is a significant advantage of Russian diplomacy. Most states have become aware of the importance of this approach, especially in the face of numerous crises.

The profound transformation of the modern world has become a tangible reality, with the pandemic acting as an extra catalyst in the process. At the same time, it is clear that the current situation has a mixed impact on the state of global affairs. It failed to mitigate geopolitical differences (just think of what is happening with vaccines) and, on the contrary, exacerbated the ideological and informational confrontation without affecting the main actors' deeply held national interests, including the regular competition in trade, which no one has cancelled yet. It did not reduce, but rather exacerbated the threat of conflicts, but at the same time strengthened the role of states as the main subjects of international life amid de-globalisation and regionalisation and highlighted the need for these efforts to be mutually reinforcing in order to be able to overcome the most pressing challenges. In other words, the crisis has catalysed a kind of "re-dealing the hand" in international politics and brought to the surface negative and positive aspects of modern international life as well as "worn out" ideas and objectives of national foreign policy and gaps in the international cooperation priorities, but also opened up new opportunities for the state policies in a qualitatively new global environment. Thus, cooperation in the epidemiological sphere has already taken root on the international stage as a breakthrough area and an example of international cooperation going forward.

The importance of finding ways to form a fairer and more natural international order that can prevent the regression of humankind due to unforeseen cataclysms has increased in this context. As President Vladimir



Putin underscored at the G20 summit in November 2020, “this crisis must become an opportunity to alter the trajectory of global development” for the benefit of all nations and peoples. This goal can be achieved only if we act fully in accordance with the imperatives of our time, in the spirit of cooperation and solidarity, recognition of the cultural and civilisational diversity in the modern world, focusing in particular on its value dimension, social development models and methods for ensuring social cohesion.

The expert community has become increasingly convinced that political and economic players can start looking for win-win solutions that do not imply losers and victors on the basis of a multipolar international order concept that has established itself at the regional and partly the global level. It is widely believed that the ideas of global polycentrism, national sovereignty and sovereign equality of states, and non-interference in internal affairs, balance of forces and interests have become vastly attractive for many societies. It is also believed that the ongoing crisis is contributing to restoration of the identity hierarchy, which comes naturally for many nations based on priority of the interests of the state, but without detriment to the factor of “reasonable” multilateralism, as opposed to the attempts to impose on other nations all kinds of varieties of the “unipolar” international order, “new bipolarity” (USA-China) or a choice in favour of isolationism and protectionism (in line with the America First slogan, etc.).

The way the events unfolded showed that the United States claiming “global leadership” is no longer able to keep in check the rapid growth of new regional leaders and self-sufficient geopolitical processes on the global periphery. Along with this, Washington's attempts to impose a “unipolar order” on humanity under the banner of a “rules-based international order” in circumvention of universal institutions, norms and



instruments developed during the post-war international settlement process (multipolar, in fact, if we focus on the principle of unanimous vote by the UN Security Council permanent members, whose action was distorted by the ideological confrontation imperatives) have noticeably intensified recently – this time through nudging the Europeans, and, possibly, India, to fully comply with the US political paradigm while leaving out Russia and China. However, the process for forming a polycentric world has already gone far enough and is seen by the majority of the international community as an objective phenomenon. Therefore, the steps taken by Western countries with an eye to uniting on the basis of prior “double containment” – Russia and China – mean, in fact, a certain protective trend in international politics, movement against the tide, which suggests their effectiveness will be low, although, of course, it requires careful analysis and a proper response.

Many experts see the aggravation of US-China confrontation – not only trade, economic and technological but military and strategic as well – as a hallmark of today’s international situation. There are many assessments out there that claim that “the new bipolarity” and the degradation of US-China relations have become a new dominant constant of our era. Of course, it is necessary to take account of factors such as weaker political influence of the “hegemonic” United States and China proclaiming itself a global power. However, keeping in mind Russia’s weight and clout as a leading actor in international life, as well as the mixed nature of the emerging international order (including residual bipolarity, which is a Cold War holdover, in matters of strategic stability), which, through regionalisation, negates any and all hierarchical constructs in global politics and is beneficial for strengthening horizontal ties. A sensible



approach would be grounded in the universal nature of polycentricity as a complex and self-regulating system, which underlies Russia's picture of the world, rather than the supremacy of such a dichotomy. This dictates the method of flexible network diplomacy as opposed to the former cumbersome military-political alliances that were cut out for confrontation/ preparation for war.

Washington's transition from total confrontation with the PRC to an orderly "competition" within the framework of the United States' purported return to the bosom of international law and multilateral diplomacy, including a return to the WHO and the Paris Agreement, would be welcome. However, in fact, as the May summits of the G7, NATO and the EU-US showed, Washington is imposing - with varying degree of effectiveness - a course on containment, or even confrontation with China on its European allies and Japan. On the other hand, one must understand that, as we saw from the 2020 presidential election in the United States, American society is in a state of a pivotal and, presumably, long-term transformation (which has been true of Russia and China for several decades now), as indicated by a sharp polarisation of sentiments. Donald Trump did not suffer a crushing defeat, but instead increased his electoral base by 11 million votes as compared to the 2016 election with 47 percent of Americans voting for him. Experts believe that his actual nationwide rating is 7 percent higher than the polls conducted mostly by the liberal media show. His legacy will be difficult to overcome, not just because his electoral base - white America - stands strong with him, but also because he has shown a viable alternative to the entire post-war strategy of the American elites. The archaic US electoral system with its indirect presidential election and major procedural differences across the states failed to rise to the occasion,



which unavoidably raises, for many Americans, the question of the new administration's legitimacy.

Regardless of what one may think about Donald Trump's policy, in its essence, it was designed to demilitarise the national security concept and to move the country forward, which is the top priority for all countries. This discussion has been going on in the US political science community for more than a year now. We may agree with those who believe that Trumpism will have no less lasting impact on the United States than Reaganism did in its time: it is just that now the pendulum has swung away from the neoliberal economy and globalisation. What the coronavirus pandemic did was make this trend stronger. It is also impossible not to see that the Democratic electorate is split and exists as a coalition of diverse forces and groups of population, such as ethnic minorities, women and young people who joined forces to remove Trump, but have different interests and agendas. Will the liberal elites be able to find a suitable common denominator and pursue an effective policy both within the country and in a “very different world” (as Joe Biden himself admitted) – that is the question. Even in the case of the coronavirus, the Biden and Trump's supporters suffer from it to a varying degree, which cannot but affect the search for balance between the interests of public health and economic recovery.

In the context of moving towards a multipolar world, supporting the UN as a unique and only legitimate instrument for maintaining peace and addressing global and regional security challenges have come to the fore. Efforts to reinforce UN institutions also matter, since many of them are being attacked for no reason at all under the banner of the need to “renew” (in fact, to eliminate them) in the spirit of the “rules-based order” advocated by the Americans. Protecting the international law system as a foundation



for a civilised dialogue between nation states is directly connected to this, especially in the face of outright attempts to undercut or circumvent it. The festivities to mark the 75th anniversary of the UN in the autumn of 2020 demonstrated the international community's commitment to the cornerstone principles of justice and mutual respect that underlie international law and the UN Charter, including the principle of sovereign equality, the commitment to refrain from the threat or use of force in violation of the UN Charter, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, respect for sovereign and inalienable right of any state to determine its own political, economic, cultural and social system, the principle of peaceful settlement of disputes, condemnation of terrorism in all its forms, etc. Therefore, the efforts to restore global governance do not have to start from the ground up - this is what President Putin's initiative to convene a summit of the UN Security Council permanent member states, which was accepted by all its addressees, is all about. What remains is to implement it in real life.

A surge in unpredictability in political and military-political processes is a major challenge confronting the modern world. In light of Washington's withdrawal from most of the arms control agreements, the current state of affairs in ensuring strategic stability, which is likely to remain a challenge in the future, is of great concern. Russia was forced to react at the military-technical level. Thus, the US/NATO monopoly on long-range sea-launched missiles was eliminated (they remained outside the scope of the INF Treaty, which covered only land-based missiles) - this could be seen from their use in Syria in 2015 (Kalibr). On March 1, 2018, in his Address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin announced the development of a whole range of breakthrough strategic systems, including hypersonic ones (Avangard, etc.)



designed to devalue the US Global Missile Defence, which has been created since Washington left the 1972 ABM Treaty in 2002. The critically important strategic stability tenet which states that potentials, not intentions matter, remains relevant under the new circumstances.

The renewal of the START-3 Treaty by the Biden administration, as well as the outcomes of the Russia-US summit in Geneva on June 16 (preceded by a phone call from President Biden to President Putin on April 13 with a proposal to hold this summit) are a declaration that there can be no winners in a nuclear war. This, together with the agreement to start a dialogue on strategic stability and consultations on information/cybersecurity, instil hope if not for a new detente, then at least for the beginning of a movement towards normalising relations between Russia and the United States. Nevertheless, Washington did withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty and is unlikely to return to the INF Treaty. There is still hope that the United States will return to the JCPOA on the Iranian nuclear programme, although the parties have declared mutually exclusive positions on this account.

Today Russian-US relations are at their worst since the end of the Cold War, and the negative trend persists along with the risk of further escalation. The United States has budgeted \$700 million to counter Russia, and an additional \$24 million to combat “Russian propaganda and misinformation” for the 2021 fiscal year, which began on October 1 in the US. Along with the sanctions pressure, this indicates that Washington and the West as a whole have embarked on a systemic hybrid confrontation with Moscow.

However, some opportunities for effective cooperation still remain, although increasingly fragile. One of them, apart from the arms control



sphere, is cooperation in the Arctic. Russia's upcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 2021–2023 opens up an opportunity to apply the experience of constructive US-Russian interaction accumulated over the years, especially in the region of the Bering Sea and Strait.

The West's relative retreat/decline has manifested itself in a changing US foreign policy, whose traditional goals and methods are no longer supported by available resources. Moreover, there are new phenomena gaining strength in Western countries' domestic politics as well, such as populism, nationalism, and growing influence of far left and far right parties. The escalating stratification and disagreement in American society are destabilising domestic politics, making the situation unpredictable to a large extent. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has led the Democratic administration to substitute the concept of class conflict (manifested in the growing social inequality and the erosion of the middle class, also as a result of globalisation driven by the investment classes' interests) with racial conflict discourse. The critical race theory was launched to combat the idea of white supremacy, America's biggest problem, according to Joe Biden). The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) supported this discourse, citing racism concerns in about 60 countries (one third of the UN membership) in its June report and urging global action to "make amends" for centuries of violence and discrimination, for enslavement and the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans "through wide-ranging and meaningful initiatives," including through "reparations in various forms." Presumably, references will be made to the authority of the UN as this policy is imposed on US allies.

The same phenomena in the EU member states had their own national flavour. Nationalism, right and left populism exist there side by side with



growing Euroscepticism. The European elites' efforts to keep their countries' political development within the so-called middle path, with routine legitimate change of major parties at the helm, encounter consolidation of non-aligned flank associations. In some European countries, such forces have made their way into the political establishment. Although the EU has reached high levels of integration in certain areas (trade, the economy, finance, etc.), the further transfer of powers to supranational bodies has stalled. The overall picture looks contradictory, reflecting the dual nature of European integration that combines national and supranational levels of government. Apart from Brexit, this was especially clearly exposed by the pandemic: the coronavirus and the economic crisis response effort has brought into relief the unique role that nation states retain in Europe, even with the major collective measures to tackle the COVID-19 related crisis taken "in solidarity," incidentally, with clear anti-Russia overtones. At the same time, we can hardly expect any breakthrough solutions that would help the European Union break its geopolitical impasse in the foreseeable future. Presumably, hence the yearning for the psychological comfort of the former transatlantic relationship led by the United States, although trust has been seriously undermined in the last four years, America has changed and it is difficult to expect things to be just like old times. In the meantime, as Biden's European tour showed in June, America is prodding its allies to support its anti-Russia policies. The now completed Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project was the subject of sharp controversy in the EU as well as between the US and the EU. As a result, EU-Russia relations have sunk to their all-time low, and the prospect of disrupting the ties entirely no longer surprises anyone. All



Moscow can do in this situation is focus on maintaining bilateral relations with interested European countries.

Unfortunately, the world has yet to resolve the problems of political violence and conflict resolution. The threat of international terrorism continues to grow, including in Europe among other places. Governments are taking vigorous anti-terrorism measures, but in response, criminal associations, extremist groups and radical political forces are becoming more active around the world. As ISIS fighters were ousted from Syria, and countries strengthened border control because of the pandemic, terrorists and extremists of all stripes began to seize “virtual territory.” They are increasingly active on the internet, using the social media, instant messengers and other platforms that are not embraced by appropriate and effective state control, also within the framework of the cyberspace sovereignty imperative.

In the autumn of 2020, a wave of terrorist attacks swept through Western Europe (Nice in October and Vienna in November). That predictably strengthened ‘native’ Europeans’ far right and anti-immigrant views, which, in turn, led to the adoption of dubious decisions in the spirit of Islamophobia, and triggered a chain reaction of reciprocal radicalisation of first- and second-generation migrants in France, Austria, Germany and other countries.

As the West strives to curb or even reverse the growing trend of its weakening economic and political positions in the world arena, it often attempts to impose the idea of using controlled chaos on the international community. The wave of such chaos, promoted by the West, has swept Ukraine, Moldova and the South Caucasus, moving ever closer to the Russian borders and approaching Central Asian countries.



Belarus's resistance to external interference and the settlement of aggravation in Nagorno-Karabakh through Moscow's mediation are examples of a successful regional approach to regional problems, which reduces the opportunities for intervention by extra-regional forces in the spirit of the Great Game of the 19th century and the Cold War of the 20th century. At the same time, Russia has reaffirmed the historical continuity of its positive role in the post-Soviet space, offsetting the counterproductive Western policy of "harassment." Those policies mostly include sanctions as well as hostile rhetoric, including unsubstantiated accusations against Moscow (the "poisoning" of the Skripals and Navalny, etc.). NATO is intensifying reconnaissance along the perimeter of the Russian borders, and building up its military presence in Ukraine, including under the pretext of conducting joint manoeuvres, which is fraught with provocations in the Russian territorial waters near the Crimean Peninsula. Moscow has reacted by putting the offending countries on the unfriendly states list (for now, the United States and the Czech Republic), and gave a tough response to military provocations.

All of the above is exacerbating the severity of confrontation between the world's leading states, as well as the risk of these states being drawn into local and regional conflicts. As a result, according to forecasts by many foreign and domestic experts, the new decade may turn out to be even more turbulent and unpredictable for humanity than the previous one. Although a global armed conflict remains unlikely due to the continued nuclear deterrence factor, smaller wars – local conflicts or clashes involving conventional weapons, with direct or indirect involvement of the world's leading powers – are becoming an increasingly realistic scenario. As President Vladimir Putin said during the Direct Line conference on June 30,



2021, Russia reserves the right to use force in response to military provocations. This will not put the world on the brink of a third world war or a big war in Europe because the West would lose it, while Russia is simply defending its own interests and “knows what it is fighting for.” The current situation in power politics suggests that the potential nuclear escalation of any limited conflict/clash is a myth, because the use of nuclear weapons is justified, including in public opinion, by an existential threat, mainly to the nuclear state's own territory. The upgraded Russian Armed Forces are capable of fending off any conceivable threats to the country's military security using its up-to-date and effective conventional weapon systems.

The “unfreezing” conflicts in the post-Soviet space and the persisting conflict potential in many other regions is evidence of a growing crisis of trust between countries. The international organisations established after the end of World War II and designed to prevent new military conflicts around the world have been sharply criticised in this regard. Dangerous trends are further unfolding, such as the collapse of the arms control system, which had been developed for decades. The world has generally kept its “blemishes” from the past, even though one might have expected the pandemic and its consequences to make humanity set aside mutual recriminations and individual ambitions and rally in the face of the new danger.

The eastern vector of Russia's foreign policy holds the most promise, especially in the context of the current deadlock in its relations with the West. The availability of opportunities for promoting a major Russian initiative about forming the Greater Eurasian Partnership covering security and economic and cultural interaction at APR venues is of particular



importance. It involves creating a broad-based association for joint development that unites regional integration processes (leaving the “door open” for all European countries) and is capable of forming a foundation for reliable promotion of peace and security across Eurasia. As President Putin said at the APEC summit in November 2020, this constructive “alignment of capabilities” stems from the crucial need to “overcome a broad range of challenges and implement large-scale cross-border projects” in Eurasia.

East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region are comparatively less “noisy” and draw less attention to themselves. But this represents an advantage: it enjoys greater stability, both domestically and internationally. The countries of the region have learned to establish close ties among themselves based on mutual respect and equality. Of course, ASEAN countries play the central role in all regional projects as they apply their political culture and practice to these projects, which is known as doing business the ASEAN way.

All of this is happening in an environment where, after 150 years of Western domination in the global economy, which stemmed from the Industrial Revolution and the creation of colonial empires, the role of the engine of the global economy is making its way back to Asia. At the same time, a highly competitive environment between the West and the East is being created, which, contrary to what Rudyard Kipling said, meet on the basis of trade and investment and free competition in technology. The United States embarked on a course of de-globalisation and recreation of a Cold War-styled COCOM back when President Trump was in office in order to keep alive the illusion of its technological superiority and isolate China, proclaiming it “the main geopolitical challenge to America,” while following the logic of the Thucydides trap and zero-sum games. In fact, Cold War



practices and the geostrategic and ideological postulates of the bygone era continue to serve as the main source of tensions in this vast region.

They have problems of their own, including territorial conflicts (Indo-Pakistani conflict in Kashmir, Indo-Chinese conflict in the Himalayas, and controversy around ownership of islands in the South China Sea and East China Sea, to name a few). However, they do not give rise to global tensions unless the old geopolitics in the spirit of the Great Game of the 19th century is projected onto a particular situation. There is no need to hide the fact that Washington is the main instigator, which relies on its old alliances and tries to revivify the policy of containment in the region, in particular, by way of creating off-limits dialogue platforms, such as the Indo-Pacific Quartet comprised of the United States, India, Australia and Japan. It appears that this “grand strategy” holds little promise, which is not least due to the fact that the APR is saliently reproducing a multipolar environment that is typical of the modern world in general. There are at least four such poles here, including the United States, China, India and Russia, which plays an important balancing role as it interacts with Beijing and New Delhi in the trilateral RIC format and within BRICS, as well as bilaterally.

The weight of the East and Southeast Asian countries in the international system of economic relations has been steadily growing in the past decades. More than half of the world's population lives here. China has already come out on top globally in terms of GDP/PPP parity and its nominal GDP is expected to be the world's largest by 2028. India may become the third country with the largest PPP (after the United States) as early as 2023. Asia accounts for 38 percent of the global GDP. According to McKinsey Global Institute's data as of September 2019, Asia's share in global trade was 33 percent, investment 23 percent, patents 65 percent, container



shipping 62 percent, energy production 29 percent and energy consumption 43 percent.

The gap between the East and the West is decreasing in terms of GDP per capita as well. In China, it is 30 percent (in terms of PPP) of the US level and 44 percent of the EU level; India has 20 percent of the EU level. The share of exports in China's GDP fell from 16 percent to 8 percent between 2007 and 2018, which is indicative of the economic growth's greater focus on domestic demand (in line with the proclaimed course on "dual circulation"), hence, the economy's greater resistance to external impacts. A similar process is underway in India. Already half of the global middle class is living there at a time when the middle class in the West has collapsed in recent decades as a result of market globalisation. This trend reflects the ongoing process of industrialisation and urbanisation, growth in labour productivity, and dynamic development of the corporate sector. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said at a recent meeting of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank:

"Now the continent finds itself at the centre of global economic activity. It has become the main growth engine of the world. In fact, we are now living through what many have termed the Asian Century."

Equally important is the fact that intraregional trade, including production chains, is expanding, and the focus is on the growth of domestic consumption (it already accounts for about 40 percent of the global consumption). The success of this regionalisation, which serves as a powerful factor in ensuring sustainable development of these countries, is backed by the numbers: mutual trade accounts for 60 percent of their total international trade, 71 percent of investment in start-up companies and 59 percent of foreign direct investment; and 74 percent of air passengers



travel within the region. Overall, the region has become more self-sufficient, and complementarity of the economies stimulates integration and the creation of powerful economic networks.

At the same time, Asia is catching up with the West in terms of problems such as sustainable growth, social inequality and environmental protection, which makes these countries indispensable partners in countering global threats and challenges. It's hard to avoid a conclusion that we are witnessing a historical convergence between the East and the West. Moreover, these processes here, and at the global level as well, are not fraught with conflicts, as was the case with the historical rise of the West during the previous two centuries, precisely because of the difference in cultures.

Unlike the US/EU, the Asia-Pacific region has largely been able to keep the pandemic in check and is now looking to reinvigorate the economy as soon as possible. The signing during the online summit on November 16, 2020 of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement by 10 ASEAN countries, as well as five partner countries - China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand - came as an important step forward. Once ratified, which will take two years, this document will result in creating the world's largest free trade zone. China assessed this event as "victory of multilateralism and free trade." The partnership will provide Beijing with an opportunity to strengthen relations with many of its neighbours and begin to address ongoing contradictions.

The partnership also includes provisions on intellectual property, telecommunications, financial services, and e-commerce. Unlike the EU, RCEP participants do not set uniform labour or environmental standards, nor do they require member states to open vulnerable areas of their



economies. These flexible rules make the agreement beneficial for a wide variety of countries from Myanmar and Vietnam to Singapore and Australia.

According to Jeffrey Wilson, research director at the Perth USAsia Centre, RCEP promises to become “an important platform for the recovery of the Indo-Pacific region after the COVID-19 pandemic.”

New Delhi was instrumental in developing RCEP, so the partnership's doors remain open to it. The new bloc does not include the United States, which showed no interest in RCEP even at the discussion phase. Notably, America's allies signed the document without waiting for the new US president to take office. In other words, the “caravan moves on” in spite of the previous geopolitical imperatives, which become worn out and obsolete.

Numerous positive trends have been gaining traction in East Asia more recently: the role of the military factor in security policy is waning, and the military and political situation has become more stable and predictable. The countries in the region have come a long way in their mutual relationships as they gradually rid themselves of the stereotypes based on confrontation and mutual distrust. Clearly, in the near future, Afghanistan, with the last US troops leaving it, will remain a destabilising factor, which will require the regional players to seek a regional solution to this conflict.

That said, turning the region into an arena of geopolitical confrontation is not an option. This is yet another reason for Russia's greater engagement in the region's affairs, because we are as much a part of it as we are of Europe, not to mention the fact that Russia/the Soviet Union historically was the conduit of eastward propagation of the European civilisation. Russia did not stay away when global development trends pointed towards the West.



We cannot afford not to be part of the global pendulum's swing in the opposite direction.

Global trends have left their imprint on the situation in the Middle East and North Africa, where the former omnipotence of the global powers has not vanished altogether, but has been diluted, and the situation there remains largely unstable. The positive developments include the defeat of the Islamic State terrorist group in most of Syria, the start of a political dialogue and economic recovery in that country, the obvious failure of the attempts to resolve conflicts in Libya and Yemen through the use of military force, as well as the suspension of hostilities and the beginning of an inclusive political dialogue in Libya. However, there are no grounds to expect a quick restoration of stability, and the political processes will be tangled, on-and-off and viscous. This stems from the complexity of the problems at hand, deeply held distrust of the internal parties to conflicts, and the clash of external players' interests. Russia opposes this with a multi-vector policy, military presence in the region and the unique experience of multilateral diplomacy that it gained in Syria, which makes it possible to reduce the intensity of and then put an end to military confrontation.

Africa, with its vast human and resource potential and the African states' aspiration towards integration, sustainable development and more engaged and independent participation in international life, has a place of its own in the worldview that has taken shape over years. The African states are increasingly establishing themselves as an important pillar of the multipolar system and are ever more engaged in the international community's efforts to work out decisions on key regional and global agenda items. This is largely facilitated by the noticeably accelerated



development of contacts between Russia and African countries, as can be seen, in particular, from energetic preparations for the Second Russia-Africa Forum and large-scale assistance provided by Russia to Africa in connection with the pandemic.

Latin America is a region of political affability, economic opportunity, cultural affinity and a mentality that is similar to ours, which makes it possible to maintain a conflict-free and comfortable environment for interaction. The pressing tasks arising from the current challenges include information and communication support for the Russian vaccine that it made available to Latin America. Traditional mutual affinity and civilisational proximity of our peoples provide fertile ground for promoting a positive image of Russia, mutual penetration of cultures, the spread of languages and spiritual values, and preserving the memory of landmark events in Russian history and Russian-Latin American relations. The continent remains plagued by the development crisis, where all previous methods of addressing socioeconomic problems, whether left-wing or right-wing, do not work and require a middle-ground solution that will be supported by most voters.

In 2020, another global phenomenon appeared, giving rise to the need for overcoming the fallout of the pandemic-related crisis for the global economy. According to the IMF, slower economic growth aggravated by the pandemic has led to the fact that “the world economy has come to a standstill.” According to the Fund, most of the world's largest economies will face a deep recession as of the end of 2020, ranging from 4 percent in the United States to 10 percent in the UK (Russia is closer to the upper limit of this forecast at minus 4.5-5.5 percent). Difficulties have arisen that are related to the disruption of global and national supply and production



chains, changes in consumer preferences, adaptation of workplaces to social distancing requirements, as well as risks that sectors of the “contact” economy such as tourism may not recover, which is fraught with rising unemployment and bankruptcies. Concurrently, major transformation processes associated with the global economy’s transition to a new technological paradigm are gaining momentum. The global economy is shaken by trade wars and climate induced disasters. The transition to a new economy - both digital and green - reveals more contradictions that can trigger social conflicts. We must not forget about the destructive policy of extraterritorial sanctions that came back with a vengeance this year. It was initiated by Washington, which attempted to use them even in relation to “anti-pandemic” supplies of goods and equipment, a fact that was decried as unacceptable by the overwhelming majority of UN members.

Given these circumstances, nation states and international organisations need to coordinate their global efforts and national responses as best they can. It is necessary to strike an optimal balance between maintaining epidemiological safety and avoiding unnecessary damage to the global economy, international trade and cross-border contacts. In this regard, it is critically important to come up with qualified assessments and detailed and verified forecasts for the long-term global economic development that have so far remained unidentified and, in most cases, exist in the form of preliminary and open-ended assumptions, which, according to the dominant opinion, need more input from the experts.

Moving towards sustainable development goals identified by the UN remains a priority for the global civilisation as it continues to evolve. The Food and Agriculture Organisation plays a significant role in this process



and has delivered strong action to create support structures in preparation for the upcoming 2021 UN Food Systems Summit.

The year 2020 marked the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory in the most devastating war of the 20th century and the start of the International Nuremberg Tribunal. It was a victory of good over evil, and humankind was given big and bright hope. At the same time, the need to preserve the memory of that Victory, to counter attempts to rewrite history or to revise the outcomes of the war, or to glorify Nazis and their henchmen, and to oppose renewed manifestations of Nazi ideology in a number of European countries has come to the fore.

We can state that the global development crisis that has reached Western society and community, and the acceleration in 2020 of the de-globalisation process generally correspond to the dominating narratives in Russia about the deep crisis of the liberal world order and the enduring relevance of the Westphalian principles of international relations.

Sooner or later, turbulence will be replaced by a more stable system. Russia must participate in forming it and be ready for operating in a new environment. It will need a combination of sovereignty and military-political might with economic flexibility and open society. Russia's success in the international arena will hinge on the development of its human capital, domestic stability, the investment climate and the effectiveness of state institutions, including in terms of ensuring social cohesion.

Diplomacy has always played an important part in capitalising on this finite foreign policy resource which is also undergoing noticeable changes before our eyes. Faced with new challenges, its structure and methods are changing, and more new areas appear. The modern information space is filled with new terms, such as humanitarian, digital, scientific and cultural



diplomacy. However, we can safely assume that the gist of diplomacy, which is building and managing relations between nation states, cannot, at least in the foreseeable future, be carried out without direct personal contact, which has long been the foundation of the diplomatic method and remains important in new circumstances as a critical tool for creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, without which no agreement is possible.

The growing role of cultural diplomacy as a “soft” method of influence to popularise national culture and promote a positive image of a country is a hallmark of international relations. Ultimately, it creates additional prerequisites for promoting long-term cooperation between nation states. Cultural policy has become an important element of this intricate configuration of realities, forms and methods for maintaining international contacts. The scale of the global and regional problems of recent years allows Russia to position itself in global politics as a responsible player that is ready for international cooperation despite the ideological barriers that are put up by the West and the existing political differences.

