

What is Driving Russia's New Strategic Concept?

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A good deal of confusion has arisen in the West about Russia's latest "Concept of National Security," which formally took effect on January 10 and was published in the weekly military supplement *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* on January 14. Shortly after the Concept was published, some Western commentators described it as a "bold initiative" by the new Russian president, Vladimir Putin, who supposedly "is seeking to define a more assertive course for Russia after years of drift under [Boris] Yeltsin." One such commentator asserted that Putin, who took office on December 31 after Yeltsin resigned, was "staking out a name for himself as someone ready to defend Russian interests."

This speculation is misguided. Whatever Putin's intentions may be, the new Concept has nothing to do with leadership politics or the transition from Yeltsin to Putin. A draft of it was approved in early October by the Russian Security Council headed by Yeltsin, and it was published in November. The only reason the document has not taken effect until now is that it had to undergo review by the Russian legislature and bureaucracy. A few very minor changes were made in the draft, but otherwise the Concept that took effect in January 2000 is identical to the one approved last October.

The mistaken focus on Putin's role has deflected attention from the deeper significance of the new Concept and the events that shaped it. There is no question that the document is a major departure from Russia's earlier Concept of National Security, which took effect in December 1997.

The latest version essentially repudiates the earlier Concept, which spoke about a "partnership" with the West. The new Concept condemns alleged American efforts to dominate other countries through the use of force, and it dwells at length on the "increased level and scope of military threats" to Russia, as well as the "grave threats" posed by organized crime, separatism, and terrorism. It also provides somewhat looser conditions for the possible use of Russian nuclear weapons, warning that a nuclear attack by Russia might be forthcoming to "repel armed aggression if all other means of resolving a crisis have failed."

Rather than being driven by leadership politics, these changes in Russia's official Concept of National Security have been spurred by internal and external events of the past year, notably the Kosovo crisis, proposals for the further expansion of NATO, disagreements about nuclear arms control, and the onset of Russia's vicious war against Chechnya.

Kosovo marked a turning point in US-Russian relations. Whether rightly or wrongly, Russian officials believed that the Clinton administration ignored Moscow's concerns in the leadup to the crisis. Russian leaders still invariably describe NATO's actions in Kosovo as "aggression" (though, curiously, the Russians have never condemned the well-documented atrocities committed by Serb paramilitary forces). The strong showing of Western air power in Yugoslavia came as a jolt to Russian military commanders, who realized how far their own forces have fallen behind.

The perceived slights on NATO's part, combined with the displays of Western air prowess, prompted a major reassessment in Moscow of the country's strategy. This was the immediate catalyst for the drafting of the new Concept of National Security, which began last spring, at the height of the Kosovo crisis. The Russian government's harsh response to the crisis, replete with spurious charges of "war crimes" supposedly committed by NATO, inevitably affected the drafting of the Concept, including the statement that NATO's operation, if adopted more generally, would be "fraught with threats to the destabilization of the whole strategic situation in the world."

The start of the drafting of a new Concept also came at a time when NATO was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. Proposals voiced then about the further expansion of the alliance were viewed with alarm in Moscow. Russian leaders have been especially vehement in opposing the possible admission of the three Baltic states--Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania--into NATO. When US officials claimed last year that the eventual entry of the Baltic states into NATO is "inevitable," this could not help but affect the drafting of the new Russian Concept.

The prospect of further NATO enlargement is especially controversial for Moscow as a result of the Kosovo crisis. In 1997, when NATO took in three new members (Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic), Russian leaders grudgingly accepted what they said were NATO's assurances that the alliance would be used only in self-defense. From Moscow's perspective, the more assertive stance by NATO in Yugoslavia without the approval of the UN Security Council (in which Russia has a veto) reneged on those earlier alleged assurances. Military officers and some political leaders in Russia have claimed that if NATO expands further, it would "create a base to intervene in Russia itself."

In addition to opposing NATO expansion, Russia has been at odds with the United States about strategic arms control. The Clinton administration has sought Russia's consent for amendments to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that would permit the deployment of a limited system in the United States to defend against possible strikes in the future by rogue states that might acquire nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles. Russian military officers, who fear that a limited defensive system could someday be expanded to a level that would erode the deterrent value of Russia's nuclear missiles, have been adamantly opposed to a modification of the ABM Treaty.

Some Russian political leaders have occasionally hinted at a willingness to strike a compromise on this issue, allowing modest revisions of the treaty in return for

concessions on Russia's nuclear missile deployments. Putin's proclaimed desire to have the Russian parliament endorse the pending strategic arms reduction treaty, Start 2, suggests that he may eventually seek some sort of bargain on the ABM issue. At the moment, however, the disagreement between the two sides about the treaty remains as acute as ever. The more alarmist view of US intentions is reflected in the new Concept, and it undoubtedly played a role in the modified provision about the possible use of nuclear weapons.

The fourth major development shaping the new Concept was Russia's latest war against Chechnya, which commenced at the end of last summer. All evidence suggests that the Russian army had begun preparing in the spring of 1999 to reassert control over Chechnya, a republic that had been largely independent since a truce was signed in 1996. The incursions by Chechen guerrillas into neighboring Dagestan in August 1999, combined with the unsolved bombings of apartment buildings in Moscow in September, which were blamed (without any convincing evidence) on Chechen terrorists, came along at a convenient time. They gave a pretext for the Russian army to embark on a full-scale campaign in Chechnya, which continues at full force to this day.

US criticism of Russia's actions in Chechnya has been very mild, but West European governments have lodged much stronger complaints about Russia's indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas in Chechnya. These protests have been angrily brushed aside by Russian political and military leaders, who insist that the conflict is a purely "internal affair." Suspicion of Western motives in the Chechen conflict is amply reflected in the new Concept of National Security. The language about "threats to the existence of the Russian Federation as a sovereign state" takes full account of this combination of internal separatism and external diplomatic pressures.

The significance of Kosovo, NATO expansion, strategic arms control, and Chechnya was already evident in October, when the draft of the new Concept was adopted. The tone and the content of the document had nothing to do with leadership politics or Yeltsin's resignation; they had everything to do with the threats perceived--at least for the time being--by Russian political and military elites.

The more confrontational outlook reflected in the new Concept is certainly cause for concern in the West, but it should not be grounds for giving up hope. Many documents that take effect in Russia are almost immediately forgotten and end up having no influence on policy. Few people remember what the earlier Concept said or even that there was such a Concept. It may well be that the latest document, too, will amount to very little. Even if it does have a more lasting influence, however, the important thing for Western governments will be to understand the factors that precipitated it. Explanations focusing on leadership politics may seem catchy, but they detract from a sound understanding of the forces driving Russia's new security policy.