



THE US NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR US-RUSSIA RELATIONS



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The 68-page National Security Strategy (NSS) released on 18 December 2017 is the strategic vision for protecting the United States' pre-eminence in international affairs. Through its NSS the US conveys to the world – especially to its allies – that it would continue to play a 'benign' superpower role and retain its 'overmatch' (the combination of capabilities in sufficient scale to prevent enemy success). While upholding the 'America First' policy, the NSS raises concerns and challenges for the US in smooth execution of its global interests. In this case, it refers to Russia, China, North Korea and Iran and also includes non-traditional threats such as the Islamic State (IS).

While maintaining the efforts for a longstanding strategic relationship with Russia, an excerpt from the report has explicitly stated that a re-assertive Russia is one of US' main competitors. The NSS suggests that Russia's political, economic and military resurgence alongside its nuclear and cyber capabilities is a crucial existential threat to US interests. The NSS, to a large extent, has left no stone unturned in creating an anti-Russia narrative.

Inclusively, the strategic partnership between Russia and China is also seen as a major threat as the two attempt to establish a world antithetical to US interests and values. Currently, Russia's strategic partnership with China is in a comfortable position yielding the expected outcomes both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. In recent times, the growing proximity between Russia and China is based on many common interests and concerns especially challenging the pre-eminence of the US. Objectively, the logic of a multi-polar world pushes Russia and China towards closer partnership by promoting multilateral organisations such as SCO and BRICS that aim to create economic and political counterweights to the US-led NATO, the European Union, Israel, Japan, South Korea and Australia. Besides, the US has raised concerns over the development of advanced weapons and capabilities

including large scale joint military exercises by both Russia and China. Nevertheless, the Russia-China strategic partnership is a key variable in understanding the future scope and prospects of Russia-US relations.

As a response, Russian President Vladimir Putin called the new defence strategy as 'aggressive' and 'offensive', especially given NATO's own expansionist policy in the Russian backyard. It also snubbed the assertion by the US that Russia is involved in subversive tactics to encroach on the sovereignty of its neighbours to gain de facto control in the former Soviet space. The US has claimed that it has telescoped the size of its military, including acquisition of new weapon systems and defence budget as claimed in the current NSS; a claim which Russia vehemently disagrees with. Refuting a victim mentality promoted by the US in the NSS, Russia has committed itself not to get involved in any sort of 'senseless' arms race or build-up of nuclear arsenal similar to the Soviet era. Reasserting this decision, Russia is set to cut down its defence budget in 2018 to just 2.8% of its GDP – close to \$46 billion – compared to US' \$700 billion defence budget.¹

Russia is distressed with the unfounded actions of the US such as the shutting down of Russian Embassies in the US, ban on Russian athletes from competing in the 2018 Winter Olympics due to the alleged doping scandal and the imposition of fresh round of economic sanctions on Russia in August 2017. Given US' arrogant behaviour, President Putin has claimed that since 1987, it is the US that has violated the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty by deploying Patriot missiles in Poland and Romania.² Therefore, presaging NATO's containment policy as a potential threat, Russia has been compelled to develop new generation army and defence technologies.

Ukraine, for instance, is once again in turmoil post the 2014 imbroglio as there have been large scale anti-government protests. The mobilisation is between two political camps, one led by pro-Western political personalities– Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko– and the other by ex-Georgian President and ex-governor of Ukraine's Odessa region – Mikheil Saakashvili. Interestingly, both the leaders possess strong pro-Western lineages and who were assigned to promote pro-Western interests in Russia's 'sphere of influence'. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine is argued to escalate to Rose Revolution 2.0, thus having a domino effect on Russia's security and interests. Given Russia's expansive global outreach, this may be an attempt by the US to restrict Russia's focus to its former Soviet states, given the latter's successful increase of its pro-active role in West Asia, Indo-Pacific, South Asia, and Central Asia.

The 'blame game' being played between Russia and the US is not a new phenomenon but the current state of affairs however holds opposing views. A re-assertive and a resilient Russia since 2000 is an 'ego shock' to the US given Russia's revival following a dismal status in the post-Soviet era. The international community is cautiously monitoring the roles and responsibilities undertaken by the two countries respectively in recent times. Both countries have found each other on the other side of the fence on many issues such as the Syrian crisis, but the US on its part has succeeded in gaining consent of most nations to rebuke Russia's actions. If one recollects, 100 UN member states supported the non-abiding UN resolution in 2014 against the Crimean referendum, which underscored Russia's reclaim. There seems to be a 'reversal of fortunes' as the US is seemingly losing its unilateral dominance in the decision making process as witnessed in the United Nations resolution initiated by the US on 22 December 2017 to vote for Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The resolution, which saw over 100 countries – including its most crucial allies such as Canada and United Kingdom – defy US' attempt, is a case in point. A key inference that can be drawn is that today the US remains isolated in promoting its international agenda while a resurging Russia has succeeded in invalidating its 'antagonistic' image post its pro-active role in preserving the Bashar Al Assad regime in Syria alongside a cost effective anti-ISIS campaign. In fact, Russia has today come a long way from being an antagonist global player to the 'keeper' of global security.

However, the ambiguity in Russia-US relations has its own perks for both the countries. Clash of interests has seen the formation of 'camps' led by both the countries which has boosted their respective arms trade market. The US recently gave its consent to supply enhanced defence capabilities weapons to Ukraine worth \$50 million.³ There is growing demand for Russian weapons too, as seen with the sale of S-400 missiles to Turkey –a NATO member. Also, key Western allies in West Asia such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have shown keen interest in purchasing Russian state-of-the-art weapons. Saudi Arabia has agreed to buy Russian weapons worth \$3.5 billion.⁴ Boeing was awarded a \$6.1 billion contract in December 2017 for 36 F-15 aircraft to reinforce Qatar's Air Force.⁵

Though strategic doctrines do not necessarily execute the fundamental proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of beliefs or behaviour of a country, the NSS is ambiguous as it has further jeopardised the precarious relations between Russia and the US. President Donald Trump has clearly deviated from his own pledge to revive the relations between the two countries. In other words, President Trump's version of NSS has overlooked his election campaign that called for 'Detente 2.0' with Russia. The NSS is a strong indicator that the US would not accommodate Russia's interests or collaborate with Russia even under the Trump administration. It is also an outcome of Trump being

caught in one of the most difficult conundrums, which include lack of support at the domestic level, active 'deep state' and political pressure, alongside a hostile mainstream media.

The US NSS 2017 is arguably a desperate attempt by the US to regain the confidence of its anxious allies. The biggest let-down of the Trump NSS is that it continues the legacy of hostile US-Russia relations that existed since the Cold War period. Stability in relations between the US and Russia cannot be ignored by Washington administration, as the country that benefits the most from this rivalry is China, which has crawled its way up as a potential global actor in international relations. If Russia and the US are able to achieve the much awaited 'Reset 2.0', the two countries can address global crises and provide global security and stability effectively. The potential compromise on defensive-offensive capabilities, including nuclear weapons, will be a key factor in strengthening and building up confidence in the partnership between the two countries. However, for Trump to achieve such a milestone is impracticable as neither he himself nor any leader of America has the leeway to annul NATO – an organisation that has aimed to contain Russia's influence in former Soviet space. Thus, to revive Russia's confidence in a pro-Western foreign policy similar to 1990s is debatable.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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Notes

¹ "Trump for 'aggressive' National Security Strategy, accuses US of violating INF treaty", *FirstPost*, 22 December 2017. <http://www.firstpost.com/world/vladimir-putin-slams-donald-trump-for-aggressive-national-security-strategy-accuses-us-of-violating-inf-treaty-4271799.html> accessed on 25 December 2017

² Ibid

³ "US agrees to send lethal weapons to Ukraine, angering Russia", *The Washington Post*, 23 December 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/officials-us-agrees-to-provide-lethal-weapons-to-ukraine/2017/12/22/a29a37d2-e788-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6_story.html?utm_term=.ee5f0958e952

⁴ Russia and Saudi Arabia Agree \$3.5 Bln Arms Deal, *Mosckva News Agency*, 11 July 2017. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/saudi-arabia-russia-arms-deal-58360>

⁵ "Airbus' A400M Aerial Transport: Delays, Development, and Deployment", *Defence Industry Daily*, 27 December 2017. https://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/airbus-a400m-aerial-transport-delays-development-and-deployment05080/?utm_campaign=newsletter&utm_source=did&utm_medium=headline&utm_term=Airbus#8217;_A400M_Aerial_Transport:_Delays,_Development,_and_Deployment