

Key Characteristics of Russia's 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept' and Its Implications

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Russia's 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept,' revised on March 31, 2023, will provide important insights into Russia's foreign policy and have significant implications for the future of the war in Ukraine and the global order when Putin's Russia is 'irrecoverably' conflicting with Western states. The key characteristics of Russia's 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept' can be summarized as follows: it is extremely aggressive, ideological, and propagandistic; it declares Russia's intent to maintain its combative stance against Western states, particularly the U.S. while focusing on strengthening cooperation with non-Western states; and changes to Russia's perception of, and response to, former Soviet countries have been detected. Mentions of the Korean peninsula were completely omitted from the 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept.' But it appears premature to expect Russia to be indifferent to the Korean peninsula issues. Rather, it would be accurate to think that Russia has included South Korea in the 'collective West' that is hostile towards Russia, and included North Korea in the 'Global South' which Russia seeks to cooperate with. If North Korea joins the Russia-China coalition competing against the U.S. in Northeast Asia and around the Korean peninsula, the consolidation of the new-Cold War bloc will speed up. South Korea's security environment will inevitably worsen as a result. The South Korean government needs to manage relations with Russia so that bilateral civil exchanges and channels for track 1.5 dialogues are not terminated. Moreover, every diplomatic effort needs to be made to prevent a North Korea-China-Russia coalition from becoming a reality.

On March 31, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a new decree on Russia's 'Foreign Policy Concept.' The 'Foreign Policy Concept' is an official government document that describes Russia's perception of the world and details major national interests, foreign policy goals, and implementation strategies on foreign policy. Russia has continued revising its 'Foreign Policy Concept' when deemed necessary since it was first announced in 1993. This year's 'Foreign Policy Concept' is the sixth version, following revisions in 2000, 2008, 2013, and 2016. The 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept' has especially received much attention given that it is the first official document on diplomacy and national security released by Russia since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Analysis of the 'Foreign Policy Concept' will provide important insights into Russia's foreign policy and have significant implications for the future of the war in Ukraine and the global order when Putin's Russia is 'irrecoverably' conflicting with Western states. This paper examines the main characteristics of the 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept' in three key aspects.

Aggressive, Ideological, and Propagandistic

First, the overall impression of the 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept' is that it is extremely aggressive, ideological, and propagandistic. Various propagandistic terms that the Russian government had not used in official documents appear frequently in this document. This includes the Russian world, Western hegemony, neo-colonialism, the collective West, traditional values, a multipolar world, Anglo-Saxon, Russophobia, and neo-Nazism. These ideological and propagandistic terms have often been used by Russia to justify its invasion of Ukraine. It is noteworthy that they have been codified in an official government document this time.

Much of the contents of the 'Foreign Policy Concept' addresses policies regarding regions and individual states. It categorizes the world according to different regions, as well as the organizations and states within them, and consequently details Russia's

policy towards each region and state. The 2016 ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ did not use this categorization. Instead, it stated Russia’s position and policies toward regional organizations and individual states based on foreign policy priorities. However, the format of the 2023 ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ has significantly changed when compared to previous versions.

▼Near Abroad ▼The Arctic ▼Eurasian Continent, the People’s Republic of China, and the Republic of India ▼The Asia-Pacific Region ▼The Islamic World ▼Africa ▼Latin America and the Caribbean ▼European Region ▼The U.S. and Other Anglo-Saxon States

Here, the following points are noteworthy: the categorization of the world into nine regions; the reappearance of the Near Abroad concept that used to describe former Soviet countries; the specific mentions of China and India along with the Eurasian continent; how the Asia-Pacific region is restricted to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) states; the use of an unfamiliar regional term regarding the Islamic World; and how countries such as the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and Canada are referred to as Anglo-Saxon states and mentioned last, hinting at those countries’ decreased diplomatic priorities for Russia. Previous versions of the ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ have had detailed policies toward North and South Korea as well as Japan when addressing states in the Asia-Pacific. However, mentions of the Korean peninsula were completely omitted from the 2023 version.

These differences observed in the 2023 ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ indicate changes to Russia’s perceptions of its own identity and the world. A social atmosphere that emphasizes nationalism and patriotism has intensified in Russia under President Putin’s rule. Many experts note that there are strong civilizational and Russocentric sentiments embedded in President Putin’s view of the world. But it is highly unusual that phrases, such as “Russia is not a regional state but a unique civilization,” “the self-sufficient character of the Russian civilization,” and “Russia’s mission to unite

the Russian world,” have been used in an official government document that addresses foreign policy. It can be inferred from the 2023 ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ that Russia not only seeks to define itself as an independent civilization that is separate from both Europe and Asia, but also seeks to stress its intent to interpret and reorganize the international order from the perspective of the Russian civilization.

Competing against the U.S. and the West and Cooperating with the Global South

Second, through the 2023 ‘Foreign Policy Concept,’ Russia maintains its combative stance against Western states, particularly the U.S., while also declaring its intent to focus on strengthening cooperation with non-Western states. Russia’s distrust and threat perception of Western states were also visible in the 2016 ‘Foreign Policy Concept.’ But the tone of the message directed at the West has considerably toughened in this year’s version. Russia defines globalization led by the West as imperialism and colonialism and opposes the global imposition of “destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes.” Furthermore, the 2023 ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ criticizes that the eventual goal of the West is to destroy Russia and specifies the U.S. as “the main inspirer, organizer, and executor of the aggressive anti-Russian policy of the collective West.”

The 2023 ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ argues that with the rise of states in Asia and Africa, the world is transitioning to a ‘multipolar world’ in which the U.S. and Europe are no longer at the center. It further states that the West, including the U.S. and Europe, is having a ‘destructive effect’ on the entire world by rejecting this multipolar reality and stubbornly trying to maintain the existing order. In this vein, the West has implemented various policies to weaken Russia as the Kremlin resists Western hegemony. It argues that the attempt to keep Ukraine under Western control is claimed to be a part of these efforts. The 2023 ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ proposes the conspiracy that it is the West and the U.S. in particular that forced Russia into the war in Ukraine.

“Viewing Russia as a threat to Western hegemony, the U.S. unleashed a new type of hybrid war. This was not the choice of the Russian Federation.”

Within this strategic environment, Russia declares that it will strengthen relations with China and India, as well as countries in the Islamic world, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia that have not participated in sanctions on Russia. In other words, Russia intends to focus on collaboration and cooperation with the so-called Global South. In particular, India and China are core partner countries that can compensate for Russia’s severed ties with the West. They are also great powers that can form an important axis in the multipolar world that Russia envisions. Considerable attention was paid to mentions of China in the new ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ given how Russia–China relations have been steadfastly maintained despite the war in Ukraine. But contrary to expectations, references to China appear somewhat principled and restrained in the 2023 ‘Foreign Policy Concept.’ Moreover, it almost seems that Russia is placing more emphasis on improving relations with states in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Islamic world, and Africa. This tone may be the intentional result of Russia’s attempt to refute the West’s view that Russia is overly dependent on China and that it has become internationally isolated.

It is also alarming that Russia considers nuclear war highly probable in the new ‘Foreign Policy Concept.’ The 2016 version of the ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ included a sentence that an all-out war between large nuclear powers was unlikely. But the 2023 version states that the possibility of conflict between nuclear powers is increasing and, as a result, the likelihood of war at a global scale is also rising.

Restoring Russia’s Sphere of Influence over the Former Soviet Union

Third, changes to Russia’s perception of, and response to, former member states of the Soviet Union have been detected. As mentioned above, the use of the term

'Near Abroad' is noteworthy. The term has often been used to refer to former Soviet countries since the 1990s. But the term had disappeared from official government documents since the 2000s because former Soviet countries were not particularly fond of its use due to the Russocentric nature of the term. Therefore, the term 'Near Abroad' had been replaced with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in the 2013 and 2016 versions of the 'Foreign Policy Concept.' The return of the term 'Near Abroad' in this year's 'Foreign Policy Concept' indicates how Russia's perception of former Soviet countries has changed. In other words, it represents how this region is viewed from a more Russocentric perspective.

Also worth noting is how the country name of Ukraine appears only once in this year's revised 'Foreign Policy Concept.' Even with that, this single reference was indirect. Ukraine was mentioned in the sentence stating that the U.S. and Europe "unleashed a new type of hybrid war" to respond to "the measures adopted by the Russian Federation in defence of its existential interests in the Ukrainian direction." Statements regarding the war in Ukraine itself are also difficult to find. In contrast, Russia's relationship with Ukraine is stated as follows in the 2016 version.

"The Russian Federation is interested in developing political, economic, cultural, and spiritual ties with Ukraine on the basis of mutual respect, and in building partnership while respecting each national interests."

Russia was punished with economic sanctions by Western states for forcibly annexing and seizing the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in February 2014. The 2016 'Foreign Policy Concept' was announced at a time when Russia was expanding its military intervention into the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, thereby heightening tensions not only with the Ukrainian government but also with the West. However, Russia's acknowledgment and recognition of Ukraine as a sovereign state was still partially visible in the 2016 'Foreign Policy Concept.' But the 2023 version deliberately ignores Ukraine, implying that Russia's perception of, and strategy for,

Ukraine has fundamentally changed.

Georgia, a former Soviet country that has anti-Russia and pro-Western tendencies, is also treated similarly. Georgia previously fought a war against Russia in August 2008 after forcibly trying to prevent South Ossetia and Abkhazia from seeking independence from Georgia through the use of force. Russia approved the independence of these two regions, and diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia were severed as a result. The 2016 'Foreign Policy Concept' mentions how Russia was considering normalizing diplomatic relations with Georgia. But Georgia was deleted from the 2023 version, instead replaced by a long description of the need to increase cooperation with both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Recently, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has shared his assessment that the political situation in Georgia is unfolding similarly to that in Ukraine. He expressed his concern that Georgia is becoming the next Ukraine after falling for America's conspiracy. Experts in the West have analyzed that Russia might attempt military provocations to restore Russia's sphere of influence over former Soviet states such as Georgia and Moldova.

Outlook and Implications

The 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept' document is 42 pages long and, in addition to the contents examined above, comprehensively addresses almost every issue area related to Russian foreign policy. Evaluating this year's 'Foreign Policy Concept,' President Putin asserted that Russia is not hostile towards any country in the world and that Russia has no intention of isolating itself. He also stressed that Russia hoped to cooperate with every country that wanted an equal relationship. But Russia's newly revised 'Foreign Policy Concept' highlights Russia's civilized and moral superiority in the competition against the West that began in earnest with the war in Ukraine. This indicates that Russia will not easily back down in the war in Ukraine or the competition with the West. The message is that Russia is only acting in self-defense against the West's conspiracy to achieve hegemony, and that there will only be a

victory because justice is on Russia's side. At the same time, however, the 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept' also claims that Russia is neither 'the West's enemy' nor that Russia is hostile towards the West, instead proposing for Russia and the West to merely resume "pragmatic cooperation." However, it is unclear what pragmatic cooperation specifically means. But regardless of whether or not Russia achieves ultimate victory in the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is highly unlikely that the center axis of Russian foreign policy will be westward again. Through the 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept,' Russia has made it clear that it will shape the future of the country eastward and southward.

It appears that Russia will focus on strengthening relations with not only China and India but also third-world developing countries in the so-called Global South to compensate for its severed relations with the West. Moreover, Russia is expected to attempt to not only expand organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), but also enhance Russia's status within these organizations.

But it is uncertain whether Russia's vision for the international order and for its nation will be realized. Even though it is an energy-rich country, pressure on Russia's national economy has increased because the export of energy resources such as oil and natural gas to Europe and the West has been blocked. So far, Russia has been able to avoid a crisis because countries such as China, India, and Turkey that have not participated in sanctions against Russia have imported Russian energy resources at cheap prices. But the West's efforts to maximize the effectiveness of sanctions on Russia have continued, and it will not be easy for Russia to protract the 'energy war.' Moreover, Russia will be unable to avoid harm to its engine for economic development due to a lack of cutting-edge technology and materials precipitated by the mass exodus of Western corporations triggered by sanctions. There have even been some pessimistic assessments that Russia may become similar to North Korea (Northkoreanization) due to increased dependence on China and a stronger dictatorship by Putin to tighten internal control.

In contrast to previous versions of the 'Foreign Policy Concept' that addressed

the North Korean nuclear problem, the situation on the Korean peninsula, and the need for balanced cooperation with both South and North Korea, mentions of the Korean peninsula have been completely omitted from this new version. Not even closer North Korea–Russia relations which have recently received much attention were mentioned. But it appears premature to expect Russia to be indifferent to the Korean peninsula problem. It would be accurate to think that Russia has included South Korea in the ‘collective West’ that is hostile towards Russia and included North Korea in the ‘Global South’ which Russia seeks to cooperate with. If North Korea joins the Russia–China coalition competing against the U.S. in Northeast Asia and around the Korean peninsula, the consolidation of the new–Cold War bloc will accelerate. South Korea’s security environment will inevitably worsen as a result.

It will be difficult for the governments of South Korea and Russia to restore relations to previous level for the time being because South Korea has participated in sanctions on Russia and Russia has designated South Korea as an unfriendly nation. But Russia is an important partner that needs to be consulted and cooperated with to solve the North Korean nuclear problem and foster a peaceful environment in Northeast Asia due to its geographical proximity to the Korean peninsula. The South Korean government needs to manage relations with Russia so that bilateral civil exchanges and channels for track 1.5 dialogues are not terminated. Moreover, every diplomatic effort needs to be made to prevent a North Korea–China–Russia coalition from becoming a reality. Communication between South Korea and Russia is more important than ever at a time when the world is being split and Northeast Asia is being divided into two competing blocs. ©KINU 2023

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