

## **THE SECURITY DILEMMA IN RUSSIA'S NEW NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: BETWEEN MILITARISM AND BEING A GEOGRAPHICAL PIVOT**

**SANDRA FERNANDES**

[sfernandes@eeg.uminho.pt](mailto:sfernandes@eeg.uminho.pt)

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science of University of Minho (Portugal) and Director of the Master Degree in International Relations. Ph.D. in Political Science and International Relations from Sciences Po. Awarded the Jacques Delors Prize 2005 for research on the European Union and Russia. Collaboration with the Portuguese Embassy in Russia. She was nominated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to be part of the jury for access to the diplomatic career; responsible for the creation and coordination of the Diplomatic Career Access Course, UminhoExec and member of the Board of the Portuguese Political Science Association (APCP). She was Guest Lecturer within the scope of postgraduate courses in foreign universities. She was Guest Researcher at the Centre for European Policy Studies

**MARCO CRUZ**

[cruz.maf@ium.pt](mailto:cruz.maf@ium.pt)

Lieutenant Colonel of the National Republican Guard (Portugal), Professor in Armed Crises and Conflicts at the Military University Institute, teaching Geopolitics, International Relations and Security Studies. He participated in GNR missions in Iraq, East Timor and Bosnia and Herzegovina (European Union-EUFOR). He is the Coordinator of the Nucleus of European Military Studies at the Research and Development Centre of the IUM, and an expert in internal security and criminal phenomena. Master's degree in law and Security and Bachelor and master's degree in military sciences. Postgraduate diploma in Political Science and International Relations and is a Ph.D. student in International Relations in the specialty of political studies. He is a researcher at the Research and Development Centre of IUM, and author and co-author of several publications in the areas of Geopolitics and Security Studies.

### **Abstract**

The article analyses the new Russian Security Strategy as a formulation of Russia's "security dilemma", both in terms of interpretation and response (Booth and Wheeler 2007). Very focused on the transformation of the world order, resulting from changes in the International System, within which the powers seek to strengthen their positions in the global structure, the strategy increasingly foresees the use of the military instrument as a way of guaranteeing and imposing national interests, which are reflected in different domains and regional areas. Exploring the strategic relations with China, in economic and political terms, Russia also seeks to strengthen its status as a global power, through the expansion of geographic space and areas of intervention. In its interpretation of the so-called "modern world", very marked by the rivalry between the US and China, it seeks to assume itself as the geographical pivot of that same relationship. The National Security Strategy therefore is a roadmap for Russia's ambitions, assessing the motives, intentions and capabilities of the "others" and identifying the "rational" and "legitimate" ways of responding to its "security dilemma". Whereas it is possible to confirm that the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 materialized the elements present in the strategy, the effects do not seem to coincide with the objectives sought by Moscow.

### **Keywords**

Russia; Security Strategy; security dilemma; geographical pivot; militarism

### **How to cite this article**

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**MARCO CRUZ**

### **Introduction**

In the 21st century, in contrast to the 1990s, Russia embarked on a path of international (re)ascension, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. The Russian-Georgian war of 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a turning point in Moscow's modus operandi in asserting its interests. These include not only areas of direct strategic interest in its "near abroad"<sup>2</sup>, but also in more distant regions, such as the African continent and South and Central America (Gurganus, 2018).

Since the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's foreign and security policy has evolved according to its relationship with the West and with the main Western powers. During the Cold War, this relationship was one of strategic rivalry, through the search and dispute of influence space, both in political and military terms (Gaddis, 2007). Moscow's intention to bring it closer to Western states and organizations even included the possibility of its integration into the Atlantic Alliance itself (Thorun, 2009). Initial support for the war on terror after the 9/11 attacks also illustrates this approach (Cardier, 2015: 160). After the phase of relative convergence, President Putin's leadership broke with this cooperative course, resurrecting the perception that it is necessary to reverse the position of weakness of the Russian nation, "having lost Eastern Europe, the USSR lost its most important defence zone and suffered a huge geopolitical blow" (Dugin, 2016: 70).

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<sup>1</sup> Article translated by Carolina Peralta.

<sup>2</sup> The term "near abroad" appeared for the first time in 1992, being considered a geopolitical "label" among Russian politicians in the context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It refers to the near abroad, that is, to the former Soviet republics, which have since become independent sovereign countries. The term recognizes the new independent status, but despite this, it keeps countries under Russian influence, given that these countries continue to belong to the former Soviet family (Toal, 2017: 3).



Putin made this perception explicit in key speeches in 2005 and 2007, identifying the implosion of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century, the aggressiveness of the enlargement policies of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the European Union (EU) to post-Soviet states, and the criticism of the hegemony of the United States (US) in an international order that is multilateral (Putin, 2005; 2007).

The role of Russian leadership has been crucial for relations with Western powers, with two distinct type-views: one that places Russia as a European power, that is, closer to Western normative frameworks; and another that defends Russia's centrality in Central Asia, occupying the "heart" of the Heartland (Mackinder 1943: 595-605) and, in this way, seeking Russian autonomy in relation to Western actors, including strengthening partnerships with Asian countries (Krickovic & Pellicciari, 2021: 89-90).

The change in Russia's path was based on economic prosperity and materialized mainly in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, and in the so-called colour revolutions that led to the overthrow of rulers in Georgia and Ukraine, closer to the Kremlin (Nygren, 2008: 30; Sakwa, 2015: 65). The previous leaderships of the Ukrainian and Georgian governments were replaced by politicians whose ambition was to approach and eventually be part of Euro-Atlantic institutions, aiming to benefit from the economic support and development of the EU and the security "umbrella" of NATO. This geopolitical framework has changed relations between Russia, the EU and NATO (Casier, 2016: 18-19; Mendras, 2015: 85). From Moscow's point of view, as during the Cold War period, Western countries sought to subjugate Russia, removing vital spaces of influence from it, not only encircling it (Crowley, 2018), but removing the buffer zone between Russia and the West (Haas, 2010: 3).

This article aims to analyse the new Russia's National Security Strategy (RNSS) of July 2021 (RF, 2021). This document is the main strategic document of the State, to which the military doctrine and the concept of its foreign policy are subordinated. As a result of the changes it announces within the international system, the new strategy contrasts with the previous version published in 2015 (RF, 2015) and identifies the main trends and opportunities for Russia in the "modern world". Based on the concept of "security dilemma sensitivity" formulated by Booth and Wheeler (2007)<sup>3</sup>, we argue that the document under analysis informs about the role of fear in Russian attitudes and behaviours. Thus, our main objective is to identify how Moscow responded to its "interpretation dilemma" by defining what the motives, intentions and capacities of others are.

Although in rhetorical terms, the new RNSS also indicates how Russia solved its "response dilemma" by listing the rational ways to respond to its security dilemma. The "special operation" that the Kremlin launched on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, condemned as a war of aggression by the West, embodies the Russian response to its interpretation of the security dilemma.

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<sup>3</sup> The authors define the concept as follows: "an actor's intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness towards, the potential complexity of the military intentions of others. In particular, it refers to the ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including, crucially, the role that one's own actions may play in provoking that fear" (Booth and Wheeler: 7).



Based on the recent changes that the Kremlin has made in its external relations, the article thus identifies the extent to which these dimensions are translated into the new RNSS. Although the document unequivocally expresses the deterioration of relations between Russia and the “Western countries”, our analysis seeks to understand to what extent and in what way the changes established in the RNSS include elements of Russian geopolitical thought (Fernandes and Ageeva, 2021) and ruptures confirmed by the current war in Ukraine. These elements include a move away from European cooperation options; a challenge to Western leadership in the global order in the sense that there are multiple centres of power (multipolarity); the search for partnerships in Asia and a new Russian foreign policy identity on a Eurasian scale.

Using qualitative methodology based on the content analysis of the RNSS, we analysed, firstly, how the “West” is approached in that same document, in terms of actors and issues, in order to highlight the dynamics of cooperation and of conflict that Moscow reveals. Secondly, to question Russia's ambition to be a Eurasian actor, we identified elements of global ambition compared to elements of a regional predisposition. Finally, still in order to assess the articulation of Russian Eurasianism in the RNSS, we assessed Moscow's objective of being a “geographical pivot” in a world that Russia perceives as not being centred in the West but composed of several centres of power.

## **1. The West as “Other”: Defending Russian Interests and Culture**

The RNSS identifies the US and its main western allies as the main threat to Russia's interests, underlining NATO's (and EU's) enlargement policies as the main element of interference in its “near abroad”. It is also in the West that the main threats “to internal political unity and stability” and to its values and principles originate (RF, 2021: 4). In addition to the emphasis given to climate issues, the economy and technology, the new strategy seeks to challenge the hegemonic order dominated by Western countries, demanding a more relevant role for Russia, which is in line with its international weight in military, geographical, technological and legal terms, namely its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

As far as NATO is concerned, the organization and its allies remain a military threat to the Russian Federation and its main partners, in particular those that are part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In this context, the construction of nearby military bases are highlighted as threats to Russian sovereignty, referring to the military exercises and the installation of nuclear weapons “against the Russian Federation” carried out (RF, 2021: 12).

In addition to pointing to the West, albeit indirectly, as being behind the computer attacks that Russia has been experiencing, in the view of the new strategy, some actors threaten Russian values - spiritual, moral, historical and cultural. The States are joined by transnational companies, non-governmental actors, religious entities and extremist and terrorist organizations. As in other moments in its history, the so-called westernization of Russian culture is seen as a threat to its sovereignty, as it seeks to “falsify Russia and



its world history, distort historical truth and memory”<sup>4</sup>, thus inciting interethnic and interreligious group conflicts that weaken the State itself.

In order to “protect” Russian values and spirit from external interference, fourteen actions are identified, with emphasis on the information and research domain, where the promotion of state information programmes and research centres that carry out the scientific dissemination of documents related to Russia and its history, in the “educational space” (physical and virtual) is defended (RF, 2021: 36-38). In religious and cultural terms, the fostering of projects in partnership with different entities, in particular with the (Orthodox) church, inside and outside Russian territory, is advocated. The most relevant aspect of the activities, however, comes from point 7, which emphasizes the “reinforcement of the cultural sovereignty of the Russian Federation and the preservation of the unity of its cultural space (RF, 2021: 36).

This “defence” of Russian culture makes it possible to expand the space of Russian intervention far beyond its physical borders. Russian-speaking communities and Russian entities that carry out activities abroad are one of the bases of power. In addition to the countries of its “near abroad”, the Western Balkans stand out, in particular Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, countries where the Kremlin maintains a strong political influence, as a result of its historical and cultural proximity (Cruz, 2021). At the beginning of 2022, Serbia, through its President, announced the acquisition of military weapons from Russia, antitank weapons, tanks and drones (Stojanovic, 2022). Serbia has been one of the main centres of Russian investment, in economic, information, military and political terms (Blank, 2021). On the Bosnian side, the political support given by Moscow for the secession of the Serbian Republic (*Republika Srpska*), declared several years ago by the President of this region, Milorad Dodik, is intended, first of all, to keep Bosnia away from approximation and integration in NATO (Gotev, 2019) and in the EU. Furthermore, with the proximity it seeks to have with Bosnian political leaders, in particular the Serbian and Croatian side of the tripartite presidency (which also includes a Bosnian-Muslim representative), Russia intends to maintain its influence (Jagiello, 2021), exploring the ethnic divisions to create instability (Mujanovic, 2017), in a region considered of great geostrategic importance for the EU (RFE, 2021; Kamath, 2021).

With this new strategy, relations with the West in general, and with the US in particular, are not articulated with cooperative projects, mainly due to Western threats in areas of Russian interest. The fight against the risks associated with the westernization of the country in political, economic and cultural terms, is assumed as one of the fundamental pillars for the Russian identity. In addition to allowing the prioritization of exclusive national dimensions, the maintenance of the western reference as the “other”<sup>5</sup> (Zevelev, 2016: 8) - a matrix considered essential from the theoretical perspective of the construction of identities (Wendt, 1994: 385) (Shelling, 1960: 19) also promotes internal

<sup>4</sup> Over the years, the theme related to historical issues has been crucial for the different Russian rulers, so it is not an issue in the current Russian leadership. Just recently, Vladimir Putin accused Western historians of wanting to downplay Russia's role in World War II, saying that the Soviets were primarily responsible for the Nazi defeat. Radchen (2020) claims that the Russian president wants to rewrite history.

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between the “I” and the “other” evidences the idea that identities can be based on difference, thus being created through a relational context (Delanty, 2005). In foreign policy, the distinction between the in and the out group forms the basis for the formulation of political identities, defining who the “we” are, in contrast to the external groups, that is, the “other”, which can be implied or explicitly excluded from the national community (Bruter, 2003: 1150).



cohesion and legitimizes the political governance in place. On this particular point, the RNSS maintains the guideline of the 2015 strategy (RF, 2015), deepening the divergences with the West.

In military terms, relations with NATO are a central priority and concern for Russia, resulting not only from the installation of anti-missile systems and nuclear weapons close to its borders, but also from the successive policies of enlargement of the Alliance to the East. In response to the recent tensions created in the Donbass region (Ukraine), Putin unilaterally proposes a "new security agreement" with the US and NATO, which guarantees the non-inclusion of Ukraine in NATO in the future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021).

The RNSS identifies a wide range of threats to Russia's national security, both internally and externally. The document's definition of what it considers to be a "threat to national security" is very comprehensive, encompassing "the set of conditions and factors that directly and indirectly create an opportunity to limit the interests of the Russian Federation" (RF, 2021). The scope of the notion of National Security, in addition to establishing the link between the internal and external domains, that is, the indivisibility between the two domains, identifies the relationship between the different types of threats. With regard to terrorism and security issues in general, including threats originating from disinformation and propaganda campaigns, there is a concern on the part of the Kremlin to protect its power internally, giving legitimacy to measures and restrictions imposed by the political power. The narrative used in relation to the West and the threat that Western values entail, and which are placed alongside others such as terrorism and extremism, materialize this same intention of legitimation.

The most relevant aspect in terms of threats concerns the way in which threats originating in the West are understood, in physical terms, but especially in virtual terms. The RNSS finds a central pillar of threats in cybernetics, thus reinforcing the subjective nature of its assessment. The enlargement of Russian borders, in the identified space of cultural sovereignty (RF, 2021: 36), in order to include States considered strategic from its near abroad, aims to obtain legitimation in domestic and international terms in the issues of protection of Russian-speaking communities, which are, according to Moscow, "discriminated and judicially accused" (RF, 2021: 6). In the annexation of Crimea, in addition to historical issues, the argument used by Putin to intervene was to guarantee the security of the Russians, who represent the majority population in that territory (Putin, 2014).

## **2. A global ambition, with a strong regional focus**

Similar to the strategies of the great powers, the RNSS gives Russia a global position, using all the instruments at its disposal: political, military, technical-military, diplomatic, economic, and informational. In this section, we identify Russia's active intervention in regional terms and the reinforcement of its role in global terms, reinforcing the aspects that effectively give it this position capacity. The strengthening of Russian civilization, in contrast to the West, and the country's global ambition mitigate Russian weaknesses in different areas, particularly in economic terms, occupying the 11th position in world terms, with the Russian economy representing only 1.95% of the global economy (World



Barometer, 2021a), and with regard to population, taking the ninth position in the world (World Barometer, 2021b).

In political terms, Russia's geography enhances connections to all continents through different forums (political and economic), in particular the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), and States with a strong historical connection to Russia and the former Soviet Union (Central and South America and Africa). As a result of this connection, economic and military relations are favoured, through the sale of arms and military support, in terms of cooperation, the installation of bases and the development of military capabilities. In addition to state-owned companies, this proximity also favours the intervention of Russian companies in the various markets.<sup>6</sup>

The RNSS also refers to Russia's global dimension through the UN, in particular in the permanent seat at the UNSC. The reference to the principles of the UN Charter, as a model for regulating the world order, intends to "call" Russia to participate in the main global issues, thus reinforcing its weight with the main powers. The appeal made to multilateralism, as a way of reducing tensions, seeks to claim a new global order, where Russia, together with other powers (China), seeks to assume a prominent role and have global institutional weight. In addition to its role in the UNSC, Russia's ambition includes strengthening its participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations (RF, 2021: 40).

In military terms, Russia's global claim is mainly made by its capability and strategic deterrence. The RNSS underlines Russia's need to maintain its leading position in terms of technology, weapons and its entire industrial complex linked to this capability. Despite advocating maintaining levels of nuclear deterrence, the Strategy continues to give primacy to international understanding as a way to reduce the risks associated with its use (RF, 2021: 5, 11-12, 39). Being currently considered the first power with the greatest capacity in numerical terms, with 6257 warheads (FAS, 2021), both in technological terms, followed by the US, the Russian nuclear capacity gives it this weight among the great powers.<sup>7</sup> In the military-technical vector, Russia sees itself as a leader on a global scale. A large part of Russian investments is sold to third parties, sometimes sacrificing the strengthening of the military capabilities of its Armed Forces. Currently, there are weapons and technology sold by Russian state-owned companies that are not available to the Russian military (Connolly & Sendstad, 2017). This sale expands Moscow's influence on a global scale, particularly in markets in politically closer countries. This is how the Kremlin's ambition to guarantee not only technological leadership, but also, as mentioned in the RNSS, strategic autonomy must be understood (RF, 2021: 13).

Despite the elements of global image mentioned above, the RNSS is mainly dedicated to Russia's ambition in regional terms, the Russian "near abroad", which encompasses the States that are part of the CIS. It reflects the main security concerns, including how Vladimir Putin will consider the use of all means, including the military. For this region, several activities and measures are proposed, including the use of kinetic resources,

<sup>6</sup> In addition to state-owned companies, mainly linked to the energy and armaments sector (Luzin, 2021), the role that the Russian private military security company Wagner plays in the foreign policy of the Russian state is highlighted, increasingly reinforced in several countries, namely Libya (Stronski, 2020), Ukraine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, and Mozambique (Katz, B. et al., 2020).

<sup>7</sup> According to data from the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) (2021), Russia and the US hold about 91% of nuclear weapons worldwide. As far as strategic nuclear weapons are concerned, the two countries are on par (the US has 100 more of these weapons, out of a total of 1700).



strengthening cooperation with the CIS States, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and with international institutions, namely the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Union of Russia and Belarus (RF, 2021: 39-42).

The strategic centrality of the post-Soviet area is revealed in the tasks identified in paragraph 101, dedicated to Russian foreign policy (RF, 2021: 39). Of the 25 proposed actions, eight explicitly concern States in this area, while others can also be applied to this region. Besides the political, informational and cultural connection, the military aspects, the sale of weapons and technology and multilateral technical-military cooperation are also highlighted here.

In turn, in regional terms, the link to China, along with India, is seen as fundamental, exploring the economic and technological aspects of this relationship, both in the bilateral framework and in the multilateral framework offered by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization<sup>8</sup>. In addition to issues related to the international order, political relations between Moscow and Beijing have economic issues as a central pillar. Since 2002, when the turnover between the two was 8 thousand million dollars, there has been an increase in trade, to the point that in 2018 the turnover was around 110 thousand million dollars (Larin, 2020). On the Russian side, exports are mainly related to the energy, technology and agriculture sectors, while China is a relevant partner in the supply of manufactured products, as well as in the investment sector (Hill, 2021). In political terms, the alignment of Moscow and Beijing reinforces their positions in relation to the change of the international order, seeking to replace US hegemony and unilateralism. In military terms, Russia is one of the main Chinese partners, providing support in the training and sale of material and technology. Together with India, the two states receive around 56% of all Russian arms exports (Connolly & Sendstad, 2017: 11). Joint exercises between the Chinese and Russian Armed Forces, such as the Vostok military exercises (2018), reinforce strategic and operational proximity.

In addition to the bilateral aspects, relations between Moscow and Beijing are also implemented at multilateral level. At the UN level, there is an alignment between the two regarding the US leadership role in the organization. In March 2021, foreign ministers called for a meeting with the permanent members of the UNSC, in order to discuss the main focuses of turmoil, with the Russian minister referring to the destructive way in which the US has acted in international terms (Reuters, 2021). In the diplomatic sphere, the solidarity between Moscow and Beijing was expressed in the Chinese silence regarding the Russian invasion of Crimea (Ismail, 2019). This stance has also been visible in the current war in Ukraine, as in addition to Beijing refusing to use the term «invasion», it has also framed this conflict as Russia's response to NATO's policies of enlargement to Eastern Europe (Liu, 2022). China abstained from the Security Council the day after the start of the Ukraine conflict, in the resolution condemning the invasion (UN, 2022).

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<sup>8</sup> A Eurasian political, economic and military organization founded in 2001, whose headquarters are in Beijing. It comprises eight states (Kazakhstan, China, India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), four observers (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia), six dialogue partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey) and three guests, two organizations (ASEAN and CIS) and one State (Turkmenistan).





On the western stage of the Eurasian continent, Russia's intervention is mainly focused on areas of traditional influence whose geographical proximity and security challenges are seen by Moscow with great concern. In addition to political and economic support for partner states, as a way of limiting the ability of other foreign powers to intervene (RF, 2021: 5, 26), the Russian strategic document points to the threats of NATO enlargement and the construction of military bases in the vicinity of Russia, its allies and partners (RF, 2021: 11). In the field of cooperation regarding information, it is with partner states that Russia proposes to work, including the use of information and communication technologies (RF, 2021: 23). Still in relation to this regional priority, Russia is willing to "support allies and partners (...) in matters related to security and defence, and in neutralizing attempts to interfere (by external actors) in its internal affairs". (RF, 2021: 40).

The post-Soviet area (RF, 2021: 42) is, therefore, the region where most of the vital Russian objectives are identified, particularly in the field of security. Thus, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova stand out as a buffer zone (Toucas, 2017) (Tabachnik, 2019), that is, as a kind of "sanitary cordon" in relation to the West, and, to a lesser extent, the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria. In addition to the military instrument, Russia's intervention also includes the information one, through disinformation and propaganda campaigns, including using the local media. This combination of civil and military, material and virtual instruments reinforces Russia's hybrid intervention capabilities in different regions, particularly in its "near abroad".

In regional terms, Russia has also taken advantage of a large part of the opportunities generated by the lack of capacity and understanding of Western powers to act in certain geographical spaces, seeking to support factions opposite to those supported by Western powers in several States. Depicting the increase in tensions and conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and the Korean peninsula, the RNSS associates this widespread regional instability as a source for the development of international terrorism and extremist activities (RF, 2021: 12). The centrality that these types of threats have in Russia's strategy, in internal (RF, 2021: 35) and international (RF, 2021: 41) terms, including the risks associated with the use of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons by these actors (RF, 2021:17), seek to legitimize Russia's influence and intervention in areas where these greatest risks and threats are identified.

Syria and Afghanistan are two examples of the way the Kremlin has guided its foreign policy, in the sense of "limiting" terrorism and extremist activities, and also Western influences. Political, diplomatic and military support for President Assad's regime has kept the Syrian leader in power. The same is true of Afghanistan, where the withdrawal of the American and NATO military contingent has allowed Russia to have an even greater role in the governance of that State. The Taliban's visit to Moscow, to point out that their rise to power in Afghanistan does not pose any threat to Russia, illustrates this protagonism (AP, 2021).

The affirmation of Russia in areas where Western powers have sought to change the status quo, mainly through democratization-Europeanization processes, aims to reinforce Russian identity, both internally and internationally. The West has therefore been designated as the "other" (Maalouf, 2003: 14; Fukuyama, 2018: 45), that is, the enemy,



for the identification and reinforcement of the civilizational framework. Although not a new element, Vladimir Putin has, in recent years, used this factor to strengthen not only the country's power, but also the legitimacy of his own power. His declaration, three days before the invasion of Ukraine, regarding the non-existence of the State and the Ukrainian people, serves this same objective, not only of hostility towards the West, but in particular of affirmation of Russian identity (Putin, 2022) .

### **3. The Russian geopolitical pivot in a polycentric world order**

We identified above that the RNSS considers all actions that jeopardize Russia's interests. This scope of the concept broadens, in geographical terms, Russia's scope of action, seeking to obtain legitimacy (internally and externally) to act outside its physical borders. In addition to Moscow's recognized military (land, air, naval, aerospace and cyber) (IISS, 2021; GFP, 2021) and technological (Jankowski, 2021) capabilities, the most recent Russian interventions have been supported by Russian perception of its active role in the current global geopolitical context and in the main world crises and conflicts, as well as by the great powers, especially China and the US. In this regard, mention should be made to Russian action and influence in Africa (Siegl, 2021) and in the Middle East (Rumer & Weiss, 2019; Borshchevskaya, et. al, 2021).

Russia's prominent role in the so-called "modern world", which is marked by the increase in geopolitical tensions (RF, 2021: 3), is reflected in the RNSS through its proposed and coveted contribution to the stability and security of the international system. In addition to identifying itself as fundamental to increasing predictability in relations between states, the document highlights Russia's role in strengthening global confidence and security (RF, 2021: 38).

It is in the identification of Russia as a fundamental actor for the maintenance and resetting of the international order that the RNSS stands out the most, recognizing not only that the Western powers will seek to maintain their international predominance, but also that there is an increase in the number of centres of economic and political power. Due to these circumstances, there are States that reinforce their role in regional and global terms, even intending to change the world order itself, in its architecture, principles and values (RF, 2021: 3). Although it does not mention it explicitly, Russia's strategic document refers to China as the revisionist power of the new global order, with whom it intends to develop a comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction (RF, 2021: 40).

Russia's favourable geographical position, as a Eurasian power, allows it to obtain advantages in the context of the strategic rivalry between the US and China, seeing itself as a geopolitical "pivot" of that relationship. In addition to economic benefits, Russia also seeks, in this pivotal position, to achieve its own strategic objectives, namely regaining recognition as a global power. Like the Chinese government (Romana, 2005: 301-309) (Gaspar, 2020: 43) (Economy, 2022), Russia also aims to put an end to American hegemony, thus contesting, both in normative and material terms, a world order that is no longer de facto dominated by the US.



Despite the proximity (political, economic and military) between Beijing and Moscow, there are areas of strategic competition between the two regimes. It should be noted that, currently, China competes in markets and with Russia's own partners, and the Kremlin is aware of this problem. The arms trade and disputes over Asian and African markets are just one of the reflections of this rivalry, since both have influence in them, and in the case of China, it is booming. In addition to military issues, there are still other areas in which relations are troubled, with border disputes between the two countries dating back to the Soviet period<sup>9</sup>. (Gerson, 2010; Sidorov, 2014). In international terms, the (re)ascension of China took place, in large part, during the period of weakening of Russia (Soviet Union and the 1990s), so there are also, in global geopolitical terms, disputed zones and areas, the example of what happens in the countries of Central America, politically closer to Moscow (Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba), in the countries of North Africa and in the South Caucasus. There are discrepancies between the two powers in terms of economics and human resources, with China booming in economic terms and with a high human development index, representing 20% of the population worldwide (WPR, 2022).

Beijing aims, therefore, to surpass the other powers, including Russia, in other vectors, particularly in the military, technological and nuclear areas. In the nuclear field, the Chinese construction of another field with 120 nuclear silos in the province of Gansu, located some 350 kilometres from another one in the east of Xinjiang, constitutes both a threat to the American territory and to the entire Russian territory (Korda & Kristensen, 2021).

Aware of the Chinese "dangers", in addition to seeking the integration of China in different multilateral forums, for example, in the CIS, Putin also intends to counterbalance China's regional power through (discreet) rapprochement with the West. Thus, while realizing the importance that Russia has for China in altering the international order and North American hegemony, Russian diplomacy has also understood its value to Western powers in relation to the Chinese threat, in global terms. Moscow seeks to assume itself as a geopolitical pivot between these two actors, valuing both the broad partnership and strategic interaction with Beijing (RF, 2021: 40), as well as the maintenance of relations with Western powers, in particular the US.

It is in this sense of greater awareness of the China factor that the strengthening of the dialogue between Russians and North Americans is understood. In May 2021, the new US administration, led by Joe Biden, lifted the sanctions imposed on the company "The Executive", which is primarily responsible for the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The project has created many tensions between the EU and the US, as it further increases the EU's energy (and political) dependence on Russia.

Although the Russian and North American leaders publicly maintain some points of disagreement (BBC News, 2021), both showed some progress in their relations, in order to guarantee "strategic stability", and establish a "bilateral dialogue of strategic stability" (Biden, 2021), in an attempt to strengthen diplomatic and military channels between the

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to economic issues, one of the main reasons that led the Russian Federation to seek its integration into Western institutions, right after the implosion of the Soviet Union, was, as Trenin (2001: 93) mentions, the fear of an eventual Chinese expansion into its borders.



two states. Steps were also taken towards understanding cybersecurity issues and conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Russia's understanding of its geopolitical and geostrategic relevance to Western aspirations to contain China reinforces its status as a world power, publicly recognized by President Biden<sup>10</sup> at a press conference after a meeting with Putin (Biden, 2021). This Western awareness allows the Kremlin to obtain greater tolerance in relation to the actions promoted mainly in its near abroad, and to increase its negotiation margin in relation to its vital interests, of which the most recent example is Moscow's demand to "close" the Ukrainian question, through the guarantee, by treaty, that Ukraine will not join NATO.

The role of global geopolitical pivot aims, on the one hand, to obtain economic and political benefits, in relation to areas of Russian interest that involve the two main international actors (US and China), and, on the other hand, to mitigate the threats that both sides can represent for Russia, exploring its weaknesses at different levels: economic, social, political and security. The current conflict in Ukraine has exposed the dynamics of relations between Russia, China and the US-led Western countries. In conflicts with the West, on the part of Beijing or Moscow, in relation to areas of influence, there is a "collaborative neutrality" (Costa, 2022) of the actor not directly involved, thus expanding its own international protagonism. Although cautiously, given the trade relations it has with Western powers, in the Ukraine crisis, China has tried not to leave Russia completely isolated. This shared awareness between the Russians and Chinese of maintaining a strategic proximity to confront Western powers is particularly valid in their respective areas of interest and when Americans and Europeans seek to gain greater prominence and limit their own influence in regional and international terms.

## Conclusion

In substantial terms, the new RNSS is the formulation of the Russian security dilemma, both in terms of interpretation and response (Booth and Wheeler, 2007). Very focused on the transformation of the world order, resulting from changes in the International System, within which the powers seek to strengthen their positions in the global structure, it increasingly foresees the use of the military instrument as a way of guaranteeing and imposing national interests, which are reflected in different domains and regional areas.

Moscow seeks to be a global geopolitical pivot, taking advantage of its diplomatic and geographic proximity to China, and thereby obtaining economic dividends. It is largely related to the supply of energy (hydrocarbons), which support its economy and consequently its technological development, one of the most relevant vectors of Russian power. In the context of Russia's increasing isolation since February 2022 and from the

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike the previous US president, Barack Obama, who referred to Russia, in 2014, as a regional power (The Guardian, 2014). This aspect is of great importance for the analysis of the evolution of the relationship between the US and Russia, as Biden was, at the time, Vice President.



perspective of the EU being able to redirect its energy market, China's relevance has increased.

Despite the preponderance of the anti-Western stance, the Kremlin is aware of its role in the relations between Beijing and Western powers, in particular with the US, identifying itself in this same relationship as a key actor in geopolitical terms. The role played by Russia in this context increased its capacity to “negotiate” in relation to the geographic space it considers to be of vital interest, in particular its “near abroad”. The diplomatic posture of the Western powers in the face of Russian “bellicosity” in the weeks of crisis that preceded the war in Ukraine confirmed this.

This Russian centrality reinforces its instruments of power as a global power, which are materialized in political terms through its weight in the UNSC, and, in military terms, through nuclear issues and nuclear development. Therefore, we can, argue that the RNSS goes from the centre to the outside. This is because it interconnects aspects of foreign policy with matters of internal policy and the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the Russian population and, above all, because the image of power in regional terms, particularly along its borders, reinforces Russia’s intentions to establish itself as a global power, in the “new” order that it (along with China) seeks to forge. However, the global effects of the military offensive against Ukraine question the statement desired by the Kremlin, to the point of becoming an eventual pariah state.

The RNSS was established as a roadmap for the announced “new” international order, within which Russia seeks to safeguard its various interests, adjusting its capabilities to its weight in the international geopolitical context, as a power on a global scale. The decision to invade Ukraine is thus in line with perceptions of threat and the centrality of resorting to the military factor. The western response to the invasion of the country, centred on the isolation of Moscow, as well as the adherence of private actors to this stance, raise serious doubts about the materialization of Russian objectives of being a new centre of power in a relationship of connivance with actors such as China.

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