

National Strategy of the Russian Federation: Geopolitical Aspects

Estrategia Nacional de la Federación de Rusia: aspectos geopolíticos

Abstract: The Russian Federation aims to resume and maintain a position of political, economic and military actor of first order within the international system. As part of its national strategy, Russia has been using its ability to project power in order to seek the reconquest of its leading role, increasing its international influence. Challenges, threats and opportunities arising from this more assertive role of the Russian Federation must be understood by the other global actors, including Brazil.

Keywords: Conflict. Russian Federation. Geopolitics. International Relations.

Resumen: La Federación de Rusia desea retomar y mantener una posición de actor político, económico y militar de primer orden en el ámbito del sistema internacional. Como parte de su estrategia nacional, Rusia viene utilizando su capacidad de proyectar poder para buscar la reconquista de su protagonismo, acrecentando su influencia internacional. Desafíos, amenazas y oportunidades, derivados de este papel más asertivo de la Federación de Rusia deben ser percibidos por los demás actores globales, incluso por Brasil.

Palabras clave: Conflicto. Federación de Rusia. Geopolítica. Relaciones Internacionales.

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1 Introduction

As part of its national strategy, Russia has been using its power projection capabilities to restore its leading role and influence within the international system. Given the troubled track record of regional and global conflicts of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, increased nationalism in the Russian Federation under President Vladimir Putin is expected to raise concern among European neighbors and the United States of America (USA). Such concern involves both sides in an action-reaction process, leading to an upward spiral of geopolitical tensions and a renewal of the mood prevailing in international affairs during the Cold War period, now in the context of a multipolar world.

The objective of this article is to describe the geopolitical position recently adopted by the Russian Federation, identifying the guidelines of the country's national strategy under Putin's leadership as well as the possible obstacles to achieving the established goals.

The study draws on extensive bibliographic and documentary research, especially official documents of the Russian government and others prepared by different actors of the international system.

This scientific article starts out from the assumption that Vladimir Putin's strategic leadership has been exercised uninterruptedly since 1999 through two terms as prime minister (1999 to 2000; 2008 to 2012) and four terms as president (2000 to 2004; 2004 to 2008; 2012 to 2016; 2016 to the present). In this sense, it considers that since 1999, the Russian Federation has followed a harmonious and continuous line of governance, particularly in relation to formulating strategies. This includes the government of President Dmitri Medvedev (2008 to 2012), since the mentor and main supporter of his candidacy was Vladimir Putin himself. Therefore, the Medvedev administration will be considered part of an overall political action.

Background information on the subject will be provided through a literature review of classical and contemporary concepts of geopolitics, including from the viewpoint of Russian academics. The preliminary stage of this study will also include a history of geopolitical action carried out during the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the early stages of the Russian Federation (Yeltsin government). The aim is to identify whether the actions taken by Vladimir Putin represent a continuity of or a break with the strategies adopted in previous periods.

To better identify the guiding principles of geopolitical strategy in the Putin era, the article will address the development of relevant aspects of the political, economic and military performance of the Russian Federation, particularly with regard to issues of international security and geopolitical conflicts. Regarding Brazilian geopolitical interests, this stage of the study will also identify Russian foreign policy action in Latin America.

2 Classical and contemporary geopolitical theories

The great wars of history [...] are the outcome, direct or indirect, of the unequal growth of nations, and that unequal growth is not wholly due to the greater genius and energy of some nations as compared with others; in large measure it is the result of uneven distribution of fertility and strategical opportunity upon the face of our globe. (MACKINDER, 1919, p. 4).

According to Flint (2006, p. 1-2), geographers examine the world from a spatial viewpoint, offering new insights into other subjects. To understand geopolitics, according to Flint, one must first understand human geography. Also in his view, human geography is not determined by a single theoretical perspective but grounded in many.

Indeed, the main theories of international relations have proven relevant to the study of human geography, political science and, by extension, geopolitics. Examples include neoclassical realism, liberalism, Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism and the different forms of postmodernism (CASTRO, 2012).

The importance of combining geographical science and social science in the study of geopolitics had also been highlighted by Halford John Mackinder (1919, p. 38), considered the earliest theoretical reference in this area, when he stated that, “The influence of geographical conditions upon human activities has depended, however, not merely on the realities as we know them to be and to have been, but in even greater degree on what men imagined in regard to them.”

But what would the most appropriate definition for geopolitics be?

An obligatory reference is the work *Bausteine zur Geopolitik*, edited by the German theorist Karl Ernst Haushofer, which gives a definition of geopolitics deemed to be classical, highlighting the deterministic character of geographical space over political processes:

Geopolitics is the science of the conditioning of political processes by the earth. It is based on the broad foundation of geography, especially political geography, as the science of political space organisms and their structure. The essence of regions as comprehended from the geographical point of view provides the framework for geopolitics within which the course of political processes must proceed if they are to succeed in the long term. Though political leadership will occasionally reach beyond this frame, the earth dependency will always eventually exert its determining influence (HAUSHOFER et al. apud FLINT, 2006, p. 22).

Note that the concept presented by Haushofer may be considered quite modern, as it did not limit the influence of geographical determinants to state actors (nation states). Indeed, contemporary theories of international relations also

regard as actors of the international system individuals, families, protest groups, corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGO), political parties, rebel groups, organized workers, and others (FLINT, 2006, p. 25).

Flint (2006, p. 25) also seeks to define geopolitics, but questions its scientific character, emphasizing that:

Geopolitics was the study, some claimed science, of explaining and predicting the strategic behavior of states. States were the exclusive agents of geopolitics. This is the period of “classic geopolitics” we discussed earlier. But, the contemporary understanding of geopolitics is much different; indeed one set of definitions would classify all politics as geopolitics, in a broad understanding that no conflict is separate from its spatial setting.

Dodds (2007, p. 44), in turn, does not define geopolitics as science either, considering that geopolitics should be understood as a form of discourse, capable of producing and circulating spatial representations of global politics. In this sense, geopolitics may be defined herein as the study (or science) that aims to explain and predict the political processes carried out by state and non-state actors, conditioned by geographical determinants.

Therefore, the political, economic and military actions carried out by different actors of the international system may be conditioned by the characteristics of the spaces they occupy. The importance of the predictive potential of geopolitics should be stressed, as this feature is extremely important in planning and evaluating national strategies.

Other concepts are also essential to the development of this work.

One is that geopolitics should be studied from two different points of view. According to Mackinder, these are the “seaman’s point of view” (MACKINDER, 1919, p. 38) and the “landsman’s point of view” (MACKINDER, 1919, p. 90). The former relates to countries that developed their maritime power primarily due to their geographical position. Examples are 16th-century Portugal and 18th- and 19th-century England. The latter relates to countries that mainly developed land power, as did Austria in the 18th century and Germany in the 20th century.

Mackinder (1919, p. 98) also introduced the concepts of “World-Island” and “Heartland.” The World-Island corresponds to continental Africa-Eurasia as a whole. According to Mackinder’s description (1919, p. 135-136):

The Heartland, for the purposes of strategical thinking, includes the Baltic Sea, the navigable Middle and Lower Danube, the Black Sea, Asia Minor, Armenia, Persia, Tibet and Mongolia. Within it, therefore, were Brandenburg-Prussia and Austria-Hungary, as well as Russia.

Figure 1 features a visual description of the area imagined by Mackinder. The shaded area represents the addition of regions related to the Black Sea and Baltic Sea Basins, which had been omitted by Mackinder (1919, p. 130) in his first definition of Heartland in the 1904 article *The Geographical Pivot of History* (MACKINDER, p.130, fig. 24).

Figure 1 – Heartland Area



Source: Mackinder (1919, p. 130).

The present-day Russian Federation, therefore, lies in the Heartland. According to Mackinder, who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island and, consequently, the world.

Such concepts are widely used by Russian academics, especially Alexander Dugin, one of the leading geopolitical theorists today, who uses classical concepts of geopolitics with the proviso that one should not agree in advance with the circumstances that these so-called Anglo-Saxon theories attribute to Russia, as one must always evaluate them in view of local history and culture (DUGIN, 2015, p. 2).

3 Evolution of russian strategic behavior

Russian geopolitics is by definition geopolitics of the Heartland; land-based geopolitics, the geopolitics of the land (DUGIN, 2015, p. 3).

In 1904 Mackinder delivered a speech to the Royal Geographical Society of London, on which occasion he introduced the concept of the Heartland, defining

it as the region of the globe that represented the “the geographical pivot of history” (MACKINDER, 1919). Present-day Russia, which was once part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (USSR), is included in that region. It is always worth recalling that this geopolitical area also covered part of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe.

For Alexander Dugin, the Heartland is not an exclusively geographical concept, but has also a “spatial meaning” for societies distributed throughout the area, contributing to the establishment of a collective memory of belonging to a “civilization of Land” or “tellulocracy” (DUGIN, 2015, p. 3). This observation by Dugin certainly evokes the geopolitical concept of the landsman’s point of view.

In this sense, Dugin (2015, p. 1) stresses that understanding Russian geopolitics inevitably requires studying the country’s society, present and past. That will certainly enable a perfect understanding of how the vocation for the development of land power evolved. According to him, to understand how the Russian government relates to its land one must firstly study the structural constants of Russian society, besides the formation and development of Russian strategic behavior regarding the surrounding world.

This viewpoint justifies the importance of presenting herein a history of the geopolitical action executed in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the early stages of the Russian Federation (Yeltsin government), as we shall see below in the following sections.

3.1 Strategic behavior in the Russian Empire (1721-1917)

Russia’s rise as a European power is closely linked to the leadership of Peter the Great (1672-1725). Focused on revolutionizing customs, culture, the military and politics, Peter aimed to transform Russia into a powerful empire and saw that this could only be achieved by “opening the windows to Europe” (MASSIE, 2015). This was no mean task, for Russia was an economically and socially backward country, extremely closed to foreign relations.

To this end, he decided to relocate the capital from Moscow to a site that afforded direct access to Europe, which required the creation of a new metropolis on the shores of the Baltic Sea, the future city of St. Petersburg. However, as that alone was not enough, he created and developed a navy to support his geopolitical pretensions, expanding Russia’s military and commercial influence to the west.

Thanks to the immense economic potential of the Russian Empire, Peter’s goals continued being pursued after his death. Indeed, the consolidation of Russia as an economic and military power was achieved by Catherine the Great (1729-1796) through military conquest, territorial consolidation and trade. According to Lieven (2006, p. 9), the Russian Empire provided one of most successful examples of territorial expansion in history.

The Russian Empire reached its zenith with the victory over Napoleon in the 1812 campaign. The triumphal entry of Alexander I in Paris in 1814 and the Congress of

Vienna in 1815 marked the pinnacle of the geopolitical effort undertaken by the Romanov dynasty. The Russian Empire was then not only a European power, but actually led the political process at the time. The deliberations of the Congress of Vienna resulted in the incorporation into the Russian Empire of Finland, the Duchy of Warsaw (present-day Poland) and Bessarabia (present-day Moldova).

The formation of this great continental empire can be considered a formidable achievement given Russia's relatively unfavorable location, far from the great trade routes and traditional centers of global wealth and civilization. According to Lieven (2006, p. 15), the geopolitical explanation for this success also relates to the decline of the Ottoman Empire, which created a power vacuum in Central Asia and the Caucasus, an area that was also progressively occupied by the Russian Empire.

Despite the efforts of Peter and his successors to create and maintain a powerful navy, the Russian Empire never became maritime power or even established any strategy in this sense that would allow it to set up an overseas empire, as did other European powers. On the contrary, its only possession outside the continent, Alaska, was sold to the USA in 1867 for fear of a possible British invasion from Canada (LIEVEN, 2006, p. 564).

At the time of the fall of the Romanov Dynasty in 1917, the Russian Empire virtually occupied the entire Heartland.

3.2 Strategic behavior in the Soviet Union (1918-1991)

When the Bolsheviks seized power, they believed that the new regime would need no foreign policy and that their focus in international affairs would be merely to export a world revolution (KENEZ, 2006, p. 32). However, political realism soon caught up with them as they were forced to negotiate the terms of Russia's surrender in World War I.

Through a delegation headed by Leon Trotsky, the Bolsheviks were obliged to yield to the interests of the central powers (German Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Bulgaria, and Ottoman Empire) in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918). Negotiation ensured the survival of the new regime, but at the heavy cost of losing sovereignty over Finland, the Baltic States (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia), Poland and Bessarabia, establishing what became known as "cordon sanitaire" (KENEZ, 2006, p. 163), a "buffer zone" for western Europe in the face of the threat posed by the new Russian communist regime.

This was a break in Russian strategic behavior, characterized by the new government renouncing the role of European power and the loss of the strategic central European portion of the Heartland.

The consolidation of the USSR was not a simple process. The future political and administrative framework of the new Soviet regime had not yet been clearly defined by the main Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin. Groups bent on maintaining Russian cultural

and political predominance were confronted with a more internationalist view, which considered the interests of the various peoples that constituted the former Russian Empire.

The definitive model was carved out during the Civil War and consolidated with the emergence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, whose first constitution was promulgated in 1924 (when the Soviet Republics of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Transcaucasia were created) (SOYUZ SOVETSKIKH SOTSIALISTICHESKIKH RESPUBLIK, 1924).

The main controversy regarding the establishment of the new republics related to the definition of their borders, which were created artificially, in a process very similar to the definition of African borders, resulting in a conflicting process from 1991 with the dissolution of the USSR.

The outbreak of World War II served as a catalyst to reestablish traditional Russian strategic behavior. According to Dugin (2015, p. 21), during the world conflict, geopolitical views were perfectly represented in the alliance against the Axis powers: the Heartland was represented by Soviet Russia and the Maritime Power by the United Kingdom and the United States.

In the so-called Big Three conferences (Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam), the main allied leaders – Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt (Truman in Potsdam due to Roosevelt's death) established agreements for the development of strategies for the war and the post-war period.

Stalin's performance at these conferences can be considered largely successful, reviving the strategic behavior adopted during the Russian Empire. As a result, the borders of the USSR were expanded and an area of Soviet influence was established in Eastern Europe, an essential factor for the consolidation of the USSR as a postwar global power.

With Stalin's iron fist imposing enormous sacrifices upon the people, Soviet participation in the Allied military campaign proved crucial, contributing decisively to the victory against the forces of Nazism and fascism in 1945. The consequence of this victory was the emergence of a global power, giving rise to the bipolar international order between the USA and the USSR that characterized the postwar era.

However, this did not result in the recognition of Russia as a European power, quite the opposite. Soviet occupation of a significant portion of Germany and of all of Eastern Europe, while reestablishing and even expanding the Russian area of influence in the Heartland, triggered an action-reaction process that led to the emergence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact.

The mobilization of the Western European bloc to create NATO can be summarized in a sentence attributed to the British Lord Lionel Ismay, the organization's first Secretary General: "To keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down" (NATO..., 2016).

Despite the more assertive posture of the USSR in the contest for global hegemony, the adopted strategy never prioritized maritime power, confirming the dominant inclination towards of the "landsman's point of view." According to Dugin (2015, p. 27), "each action was directed towards strengthening the power of the civilization of Land, expanding the Soviet government's zone of influence, and defending

strategic interests.” Alexander Dugin stresses that throughout the Soviet period a consistent Eurasian geopolitical strategy was implemented.

The dissolution of the USSR was triggered by the severe economic constraints created by the inefficiency of the state model, the severe political constraints imposed by the Communist Party leadership and the reactions during World War II, particularly of the Baltic states, which never accepted their annexation.

President Gorbachev unsuccessfully sought to reverse this situation with the perestroika and glasnost policies but was unable to prevent the end of the USSR. Dugin (2015, p. 33) believes that Gorbachev’s policies actually led to the collapse of the global system of influence established by the Soviets, with the vacuum being quickly occupied by the USA and NATO.

The voluntary self-destruction of the USSR was interpreted by many analysts as resulting from the action of leaderships represented by Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

3.3 Strategic behavior in the Yeltsin administration

Kenez (2006, p. 279) defined Yeltsin’s decision to announce the withdrawal of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic from the USSR as a “leap into the unknown.” Moreover, his attempt to implement a change of direction based on what was known as “shock therapy” did not account for the disastrous consequences of that decision, whether for the economy, for politics or even for the safety of the budding Russian Federation.

Yeltsin’s performance was arguably an absolute exception in Russian geopolitical history. According to Dugin (2015, p. 34), “Not only was the socialist system destroyed; the Heartland was destroyed from within.” More than the victory of capitalism over communism, the “independence” of the Russian Federation introduced by Yeltsin represented the defeat of the civilization of Land by the civilization of Sea.

Despite being political rivals, Gorbachev and Yeltsin pursued a policy of appeasement with the Western powers, helping to break with the “Eurasian” behavior adopted by the USSR and seeking to insert Russia in the “Atlanticist” model led by the USA (DUGIN, 2015, p. 46).

The foreign policy model initially adopted by the Yeltsin administration was based on the so-called “Kozyrev Doctrine,” named after the Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrey Kozyrev. According to this doctrine, global unipolarity under US leadership should be taken as a given, with the Russian Federation resigned to becoming integrated with the Western world to obtain a favorable position, as far as possible (DUGIN, 2015, p. 50).

However, President Putin viewed this strategy from a very different perspective. In his 2005 State of the Union address to the Russian Federal Assembly, he described the process that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union as the “geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (POSLANIE..., 2005).

In the same vein as President Putin, Dugin states that even the leaders most favorable to European integration, such as Peter, Catherine and Alexander II,

acted decisively to expand the Russian territory. In the same way Stalin, based on the negative experience of Brest-Litovski, soon began to act towards strengthening the USSR and recovering its leadership in central Europe.

On December 31, 1999, Yeltsin surprised the country and the world by announcing his resignation. According to Kenez (2006, p. 299), the Russian Federation was being governed by a sick man whose resignation was overdue, since he was no longer in control of the situation.

4 The Russian Federation in the Putin Era

Unlike Yeltsin, whose ideology was anti-communism, Putin was a synthesizer. Although he distanced himself from the Soviet past and paid lip-service to the idea of democracy, he realized that the seventy-four-year-long communist history could not be eradicated from the national memory. (KENEZ, 2006, p. 300).

After President Yeltsin's troubled period, it was left to Vladimir Putin to work on building a Russian national identity. In power since 1999 in alternating terms as prime minister and president, he was largely responsible for rebuilding political, economic and military institutions, conducting the shift from the communist model to a market economy.

A common misunderstanding is that the Russian Federation is still a communist country, or even that its government is leftist. No doubt that is because the country is the origin of the international communist movement and its main leader, Putin, is a former KGB agent.

However, it is not an accurate picture. President Putin's political views and those of his supporting party, United Russia, basically favor a free market economy and tend to the right-wing end of the political spectrum.

Internally, one of President Putin's main traits is authoritarian governance, exploiting the constitutional loopholes in the Federal Constitution (ROSSIYA, 1993) drafted in the Yeltsin administration. According to Kenez, such a profile could be understood as a necessary step to stamp out the anarchy that characterized the Yeltsin government (ROSSIYA, 1993, p. 301).

The report of the "Russia and Eurasia 2020" Conference, held by the US National Intelligence Council, thus defined Russia in the Putin era:

The regional experts who attended our conference felt that Russia's political development since the fall of Communism has been complicated by the continuing search for a post-Soviet national identity. Putin has increasingly appealed to Russian nationalism—and, occasionally, xenophobia—to define Russian identity. His successors may well define Russian identity by highlighting Russia's imperial past and its domination over its neighbors even as they reject communist ideology (UNITED STATES, 2004, p. 74)

4.1 Political performance

The Russian Federation is still a country of continental dimensions, stretching across (11) time zones if one includes the Kaliningrad enclave. Its internal political organization is complex: there are 22 semi-autonomous republics, 9 territories or Krai, 46 provinces or autonomous regions (Oblasts), 3 autonomous cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg and Sevastopol), 1 autonomous province (Jewish Province) and 4 autonomous districts (BLINNIKOV, 2011). Each of these 85 subdivisions has its own government framework, with varying degrees of autonomy from the Federation, according to the country's Constitution.

In addition to the Federal Constitution (ROSSIA, 1993), its foreign policy is guided by various documents drafted over the years under the supervision of President Putin. The main documents that provide geopolitical guidance are "Military Doctrine" (VOENNAIA..., 2014), "National Security Strategy" (UKAZ..., 2015) and "National Goals and Strategic Objectives through to 2024" (THE PRESIDENT..., 2018).

The Russian National Security Strategy was issued in 2015 and describes the country's national strategic interests. Identifying such interests is the starting point to conduct an analysis on the Russian foreign policy today. Prominent among them are (our translation):

- strengthening the country's defense capacity, ensuring its inviolability;
- political and social stability through the development of democratic institutions;
- raising living standards for the population;
- preserving cultural values and moral and spiritual traditions of the Russian people (I highlight in this respect the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the country's political and strategic decisions);
- increasing the competitiveness of the Russian economy; and
- consolidating the Russian Federation as a world power.

To address these strategic interests, as well as guide the country's public policies, the Russian government drafted in 2018 the Executive Order on "National Goals and Strategic Targets through to 2024" (the last year of President Putin's current term). Among the established goals, the following stand out:

- ensure sustainable natural population growth;
- increase life expectancy to 78 years (80 years by 2030);
- ensure sustainable growth of real wages and pensions above inflation level;
- cut poverty by half;
- improve housing conditions (5 million households per year);
- increase the number of organizations engaged in technological innovation to 50 percent of the total;
- speed up the introduction of digital technologies in the economy and the social sphere (e-government);

- take Russia into the top five largest global economies;
- upgrade and expand core infrastructure, develop East-West and North-South transport corridors, including:
 - upgrading the motorways that are part of the Europe-China international transport route;
 - increasing the capacity of Russian seaports, including the ports of the Far East, Northwestern, Volga-Caspian and Azov-Black Sea basins;
 - developing the Northern Sea Route and increasing its cargo traffic to 80 million tonnes;
 - reducing the time to ship containers by rail down to seven days and quadrupling the volume of transit container traffic by rail between Western China and Europe;
 - creating nodal cargo multimodal transport and logistics centers;
 - increasing the throughput capacity of the Baikal-Amur e Trans-Siberian railways by 50% (to 180 million tonnes).

A previous document drafted in 2014 presented the main threats to achieving the goals of Russia's National Strategy. This is the "Military Doctrine," which defines them as the following: (our translation):

- deployment of NATO forces near borders and territorial waters of the Russian Federation;
- development and installation of anti-missile systems and other weapons of mass destruction affecting the military balance with the Russian Federation;
- use of information and communication technologies for military purposes (cyber warfare); and
- interference in internal affairs of the Russian Federation and its allies.

Regarding domestic policy, as already noted, President Putin has been in power since 1999, leading the party of his own creation, United Russia. In the last two presidential elections (2012 and 2018) Putin won by a large margin, obtaining 64% and 76.67% of valid votes, respectively (PUTIN'S..., 2019).

It is noteworthy that voting is not compulsory in Russia and that the main opposition candidates (particularly Alexei Navalny) have been constantly prosecuted or arrested, barred from running in the elections.

In addition, according to surveys by the Yuri Levada Analytical Center (PUTIN'S..., 2019), President Putin's approval rating, which soared (above 80%) after the incorporation of Crimea (2014), has fallen since 2017, currently standing at around 68%. Noteworthy is the increasing rejection rating, already exceeding 30%.

President Putin's declining popularity may be related to rising cost of living and unemployment, but mainly results from the approval of the pension reform carried out in 2018 and 2019. According to Yalowitz and Courtney (2019), recent demonstrations

against the Putin administration are directly related to wage losses and the unpopular increase in retirement age.

These adjustment measures were due to the Russian budget deficit caused by excessive defense spending and the drop in international oil prices in 2016 and 2017, which affected the country's income inflow, highly dependent on hydrocarbon exports. The recent rise in commodity prices may contribute to reverse this trend, but President Putin's political future is far from certain, as there is no political scope for a new action such as that carried out in Crimea in 2014.

Relations with the US were expected to improve significantly after the defeat of candidate Hillary Clinton in the 2016 elections, but accusations of Russian interference to favor the election of Donald Trump sparked a new crisis between the two countries and have contributed to cool down the relationship between the respective governments. Despite the unfavorable mood, Putin and Trump have given signs of appeasement, especially regarding efforts in the Syrian Civil War and, more recently, Trump's proposal to readmit Russia to G7. Russian public opinion has disagreed with the foreign policy of the Putin administration regarding the US, with the rejection rating reaching 43% (PUTIN'S..., 2019).

Concerning multilateral forums, the Russian government's scope of action was severely affected after the Crimean crisis with the various sanctions imposed by Western powers. Therefore, Russia's participation in BRICS gained prominence in the country's foreign policy. In economic terms, relations with China are key to the Russian Federation and the country's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is also considered very important.

Regarding international security and military cooperation, Russia is the head organizer and supporter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which includes several former Soviet states (Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan).

4.2 Economic Performance

The Russian Federation is heavily dependent on hydrocarbon exports (oil and natural gas), especially to Europe and China. The latter has significantly increased its share of the Russian trade balance, accounting for 12.5% of Russia's exports in 2018 (RUSSIA..., 2019).

With regard to imports, data of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (2019) show that Russia is a major importer of machinery and equipment (45% of the total), indicating the post-1991 decline of Soviet industry, one of the mainstays of the USSR economy. An exception is the arms industry, which has survived and been modernized due to the volume of government procurement and exports to allied countries, as seen in data collected by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (GLOBAL..., 2019; SIPRI, 2018).

Regarding natural gas exports to Europe, which relies heavily on this commodity for residential and industrial heating, European countries are greatly dependent on supply from Russia. In 2018, 42% of overall European natural gas imports came from Russia, according to official figures from the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat), which stresses the higher dependence of major European Union economies (Germany: 50 to 75%; Austria, Hungary and Poland: 75 to 100%) (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2019).

A network of pipelines to meet the European demand has been exploited and expanded by Russia, thus reducing operating costs. However, following the Crimean crisis, European countries are reconsidering the convenience of such dependency, despite the considerably higher costs of other options.

China's role in world trade has become increasingly relevant and Russia has sought to improve its infrastructure to enable more Chinese products to reach European markets more directly, thus reducing costs and making them more competitive. In this sense, the building and modernization of pipelines, railways and new maritime trade routes has been a strategic objective of the Russian government.

This project, which is being dubbed the "new silk route" (and aims to integrate the Chinese strategy known as Belt and Road Initiative), also involves the development of new Arctic sea routes. This possibility has been explored with the impacts of global warming on the northern polar ice cap, which has been progressively receding and allowing a regular flow of commercial vessels.

The Arctic route has been in use since 2017. Being entirely in Russian territorial waters, it can be controlled by the Russian government, which includes the charge of transit rates. Nevertheless, the costs for Chinese and European companies are lower compared to the traditional route through the Indian Ocean, Strait of Hormuz and Suez Canal.

Not only are distances greater on the traditional routes, but rates are high and there is the risk of pirate attacks, which in itself significantly raises insurance costs of freight and vessels. The Arctic region is therefore considered a priority in Russian national strategy, including its military occupation.

A major challenge for the Russian economy has been the country's increasing population decline, a growing trend since the end of the USSR. According to a report from the UN Development Programme (UNDP, 2008, p. 129), "In coming decades Russia faces a unique and historically unprecedented challenge – to support high economic growth rates despite ongoing decline of the population, including the economically active population."

The trend has been confirmed by the most recent statistical data issued by the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (FSGS), which indicated a 2% reduction in the Russian population between 2008 and 2017 (ROSSIJA, 2018, p. 11).

Also according to the UNDP, the aging of the economically active population is likewise a worrying trend, as the percentage of older people in the workforce tends to increase in coming decades. Meanwhile, it is predicted that the percentage of young people

(under 30) will decline to less than a quarter of the working-age population, which would be absolutely catastrophic for the country's aspirations to become one of the world's five largest economies.

According to *Mapping the Global Future: Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project*, published by the US National Intelligence Council, "Russia has the potential to enhance its international role with others due to its position as a major oil and gas exporter. However, Russia faces a severe demographic crisis resulting from low birth rates, poor medical care, and a potentially explosive AIDS situation" (UNITED STATES, 2019, p. 10).

This has posed a dilemma for the Russian government: although the country is traditionally averse to encouraging immigration, the latter has become essential to reverse the demographic trend. Russia has encouraged immigration of workers from former Soviet states, particularly those who speak Russian, but the demand is unlikely to be met by this measure alone (RAGOZIN, 2017).

4.3 Military Performance

The end of the USSR led to an unprecedented crisis within the military forces of the former Red Army. Its nuclear arsenal was kept in the Russian Federation, but the conventional forces were apportioned among the various former Soviet states, accounting for a huge reduction in the operating capacity of all armies, which had to be organized from 1991.

Regarding Russia, tight budget constraints led to the almost complete obsolescence of conventional arsenals, coupled with total discouragement to pursue a military career due to extremely low wages and poor working conditions. Most of the military budget had to be directed towards maintaining the huge nuclear arsenal inherited by the Russian Army.

From the crisis with Georgia in 2008, involving a military confrontation over a border dispute for South Ossetia, President Putin ascertained the need to invest in his armed forces (SMITH, 2013). Since then an ambitious program to re-equip and transform the armed forces has been carried out. In addition, NATO's advance among the former Soviet states, which feared sharing Georgia's fate, increased concern among the Russian leadership that national security would be threatened without adequate deterrent capacity.

In a first moment, a major effort to improve the conditions of military careers was made, and a program for conventional weapons replacement was implemented as well.

New strategic nuclear weapons are currently being developed with modern technology to make them immune to any defensive measures in Western power arsenals (anti-missile shields): hypersonic missiles, nuclear-powered missiles, unlimited range non-ballistic trajectories, underwater drones intended to destroy the US

aircraft carrier fleet, among others, have been announced by President Putin as fully operational.

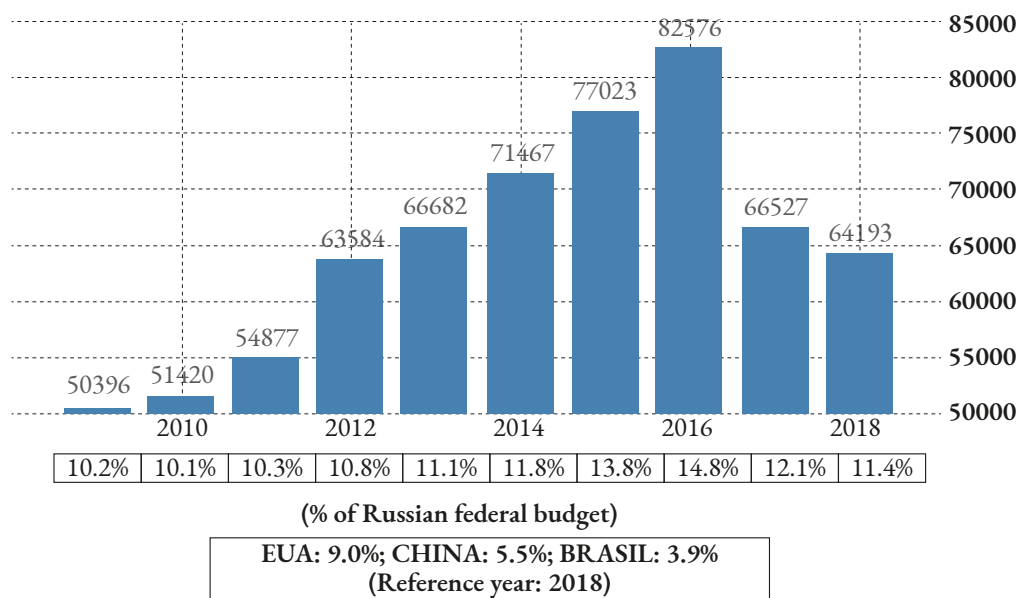
A recent incident in the Arkhangelsk region (northern Russia) revealed that a nuclear-powered missile under test had reportedly crashed and caused a radioactive leak, raising military and environmental concerns in the West regarding Russia’s new military capabilities.

In order to enable the development of this ambitious program of re-equipping and transforming its armed forces, the Russian government has invested considerable portions of its budget. Graph 1 shows the evolution of the budget for defense spending between the years 2009 and 2018. An upward trend can be observed until 2016, when almost 15% of the Russian budget was allocated to the armed forces, dropping to 11.4% in 2018. In the same year, countries such as the US, China and even Brazil recorded significantly lower rates, revealing the great effort still spent on this project.

However, the oil prices drop in the foreign market, which occurred as of 2016, weighed heavily on President Putin’s plans, forcing the Russian government to significantly reduce defense spending since other budget items were being neglected, affecting, in turn, various public policies and social programs and triggering the fall of the president’s popularity.

Therefore, the re-equipment program was readjusted in more realistic terms, but spending continued quite high compared to other countries, as noted.

Graph 1- Comparative budget evolution (2009 – 2018)



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2019).

4.4 Geopolitical action of global impact

The international order that followed the breakup of the USSR was progressively shaped into a multipolar model, wherein various traditional and rising actors gradually acquired political and strategic weight.

Regarding the Russian Federation, an analysis of the main geopolitical guidelines already discussed in item 4.1. as well as other bibliographic sources allows us to identify several areas of interest within Russian national strategy.

However, for the purposes of this study, only the following geopolitical issues will be addressed:

- Eastern Europe and the strategic confrontation with NATO forces;
- the conflict with Ukraine; and
- military intervention in Syria.

Although Latin America is not an area of geopolitical priority for the Russian Federation, its action in this region will also be addressed in view of the interest for Brazilian foreign policy.

4.4.1 Eastern Europe and the strategic confrontation with NATO forces

Only by Russia's assertion of itself as a land-based regional power in opposition to the sea-based Atlanticism of the United States and NATO can Russia survive in any genuine sense (DUGIN, 2015).

Concerning Eastern Europe, it is noted that the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 sounded the alarm for the former Soviet states, particularly Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine, as well as for former Warsaw Pact countries such as Poland. This conflict was due to fears that poorly resolved border issues, as well as the existence of large Russian communities in their respective areas, could be used by the Russian government as an excuse for confrontation and potential attempts of Russian territorial expansion. In this sense, the fear led to a rush by these countries to join NATO.

However, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, signed in 1992, while allowing the withdrawal of a significant number of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, also prohibited the expansion NATO forces to the east.

Ignoring this point of the agreement, the leaders of the main Western powers (USA, UK and Germany) approved the membership of former Warsaw Pact or USSR countries. The Russian Federation reacted strongly, but this was largely disregarded by NATO, since at the time Russia had no scope of action to oppose this advance towards its borders.

Another confrontational issue was the installation of the US state-of-the-art missile defense system in Poland. NATO alleged that the reason was to mount a defense against possible attacks from North Korea and Iran, but it was interpreted in Russia as an attempt to break the nuclear balance built up during the Cold War (the balance of terror), making Russian nuclear missiles obsolete.

Such initiatives progressively convinced the Russian government to invest heavily in new missile technologies, as described in section 4.3., and also contributed to undermine the framework of the various nuclear weapon disarmament and limitation treaties and agreements laboriously built up throughout the Cold War, on which the security of the international system was based.

The five main treaties signed with the USSR/Russian Federation were: Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (1972), Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (1992), Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (1988), Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty – New START (2011) and Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Of those, only the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty is still in force, which certainly places world peace at an unprecedented level of risk (NUCLEAR THREAT INITIATIVE, 2019).

4.4.2 The conflict with Ukraine

Regarding Ukraine, a key factor was the coup that overthrew President Yanukovich's pro-Russian government following the so-called Maidan protests in 2013 and 2014. Russia's response was vigorous compared to its reaction towards the other former Soviet states. The general understanding is that Ukraine can be considered the "red line" established by Russia for the advance NATO forces (GADDY, ICKES, 2014).

Russia's reaction to Ukraine was not long in coming, whether in the annexation of Crimea or the explicit support to separatism in areas with a majority of Russian population in the Donbass region.

Regarding the annexation of Crimea, which was not recognized by the international community and resulted in various sanctions against the Russian government and authorities, it is estimated that the position of the Russian government is unlikely to be reversed, with major consequences for Ukraine, especially regarding the loss of important and necessary natural gas reserves in the Crimean exclusive economic zone.

Similarly, access to the Sea of Azov is now controlled by the Russian government in the Kerch Strait, where a long railway bridge linking Crimea with Russian territory was recently opened. Russian control of maritime traffic in the Kerch Strait limits or even impedes access to Ukrainian ports situated in the Sea of Azov.

President Zelensky's recent election in Ukraine was a defeat for the Ukrainian political trends that are more radical in their approach to Russia (represented by former

President Porochenko), but the new government has not yet indicated how it will deal with the crisis henceforth.

The conflict with Ukraine also involves the fate of the Donbass region, where the majority Russian population has started seeking greater autonomy or secession, probably with strong political and military support from Russia.

In this respect, two self-proclaimed republics were established in the region: the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. The most direct consequence of this for Ukraine is certainly the impossibility to join NATO, since the organization's rules do not allow membership of countries with ongoing conflicts.

Russia is undoubtedly interested in seeing this issue become another "slumbering conflict" similar to those in other situations, such as the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which have survived since the end of the war with Georgia.

Diplomatic channels have remained open for this crisis, particularly through the so-called Trilateral Contact Group (Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe-OSCE), based on the Minsk Protocol (2014).

4.4.3 Military intervention in Syria

Syria was a longtime ally of the Soviet Union and has remained a close associate of the Russian Federation, which keeps naval and air bases in the country, enabling the deployment of Russian military power in the Mediterranean.

The so-called Arab Spring, which toppled the authoritarian governments of several countries in northern Africa and the Middle East, was also felt in Syria. Russia always argued that such revolts were directly fueled and financed by Western powers and acted strongly to prevent the allied regime of Bassar El-Assad from being removed from power, which would certainly hinder Russia's strategic military presence in the country (SYRIA..., 2015).

At the same time, the Russian government also supported the Syrian government's struggle against the Islamic State (ISIL) forces that controlled a large portion of Syrian territory. In this case its interests were aligned with those of the USA, as both governments sought to eliminate the threat posed by the Islamic State (RUSSIA, 2016).

Another major player in this crisis is Turkey, as it is fighting the Kurdish forces operating on its border with Syria, which were traditionally supported by US forces. Russia has sought to capitalize on the complexity of this conflict to provoke dissension within NATO, seeking an increasingly successful rapprochement with the Turkish government.

Russian interest in Syria is not limited to military aspects. In addition to having considerable oil reserves, it is a mandatory gateway for future pipelines from the USA's ally in the region, Iraq.

Specifically in military terms, the direct participation of Russian army, air and naval forces in Syria was an excellent opportunity to deploy and hone new military doctrine

and equipment. These proved essential for the Syrian regime to swiftly reverse a situation of near defeat.

4.4.4 Action in Latin America

Despite being a region of secondary interest in Russian geopolitical strategy, particularly due to economic, operational and logistical difficulties, Latin America has received some attention from Russian foreign policy.

In some countries, its interest is based on the possibility of creating embarrassment in an area of direct influence of the US (being a “thorn in its side”), which can be used to regulate the intensity of Russian strategic actions regarding sanctions and other measures adopted by the US government that run counter to Russian interests. This seems to be the case with Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

As with Syria, Russia is interested in preserving ties with historical USSR/Russia allies, especially Cuba and Nicaragua, which are still in a position of confrontation with the US today. In the specific case of Venezuela, the interest is to prevent a regime change in a country that has been an ally since the government of Hugo Chaves.

According to research conducted by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the main areas of exchange with the cited Latin American countries are as follows (GONZALES, 2019):

- **Venezuela:** The country is the largest buyer of Russian military weapons and equipment in Latin America. About 60% of Russian military hardware exports went to Venezuela (before the Venezuelan crisis). In 2019, military cooperation with the Maduro administration increased, including the dispatch of military advisors. Russian oil companies operate in the country.
- **Cuba:** Intense military-technical cooperation with Cuba still exists. With the post-Cold War economic crisis, Russia limited the supply of spare parts and provides repair services for equipment manufactured in the former Soviet Union. A Russian military base in country is once again being considered.
- **Nicaragua:** During the Cold War, up to 90% of Nicaragua’s military weapons and equipment were Soviet-made. In 2015 a treaty was signed to allow Russian warships to enter Nicaraguan ports, plus an agreement to conduct patrols in coastal waters.

However, Russian foreign policy goes beyond political realism and the country has sought to increase trade cooperation with Latin America and Caribbean countries. According to a study by Gurganus (2018), total trade between Russia and the region reached US\$ 12 billion in 2016, a 44% increase compared to 2006. The study also reported that Brazil and Mexico accounted for over 50% of Russia’s trade with the region over the period. Also according to Gurganus, in the last decade Russia made

significant investments in oil and gas in countries such as Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico and, particularly, Venezuela.

Regarding its BRICS partner Brazil, the study by Julia Gurganus identifies that bilateral trade relations are still largely dependent on imports of Brazilian meat and exports of Russian fertilizers. In 2016 Brazil-Russia trade reached US\$ 4.3 billion. The Rosneft and Gazprom oil companies have been actively seeking participation to explore the recently discovered Brazilian pre-salt layer reserves.

In military affairs, the study shows that between 2012 and 2017 Russia accounted for 7% of weapons imported by the Brazilian armed forces, supplied attack helicopters (Mi-35) to the Brazilian Air Force and installed a maintenance center for the operation of said aircraft in Brazil. The Russian military industry is also a traditional supplier of portable anti-aircraft missiles to the Brazilian Army and Air Force (IGLA missile).

A more assertive space partnership has also been long discussed, particularly to obtain technology for the development of liquid-propellant rocket engines by the Brazilian space program, but this initiative has not yet materialized. However, the space partnership exists, as Russia has already deployed four stations of its global positioning system (GLONASS) on Brazilian soil (GURGANUS, 2018).

There is expectation regarding the potential influence of the political change in Brazil following the 2018 elections on relations with the BRICS countries in general and the Russian Federation in particular. Brazil takes the rotating presidency of the BRICS in 2019 and will have the opportunity to present its new orientation in this regard, eagerly awaited by Russian diplomacy.

The motto chosen by Brazilian diplomacy for Brazil's term in the presidency was: "BRICS – economic growth for an innovative future" (MOTTE..., 2019). Environmental issues may be debated in this forum to create a joint position on such themes, potentially strengthening Brazil's position regarding sustainable development in the Brazilian Amazon region.

Should Russia and the other BRICS countries support Brazil's positions, discussions with the European Union on environmental issues and trade agreements will reach a new level. Therefore, Russia's position may prove relevant to Brazilian geopolitical interests.

Other South American countries also have bilateral relations with the Russian Federation. Peru, for example, is a traditional market for Soviet and Russian-made defense products, and currently owns a sizable fleet of Russian helicopters of various models, besides also having a maintenance center in its territory with technical support by and technology transfer from the Russian partners.

Finally, Bolivia has also been seeking to establish a strategic partnership with the Russian Federation. In this regard, several cooperation agreements have been signed in recent years, including for exchange in atomic energy, with the possible installation of a production and research complex in Bolivian territory (ENERGÍA..., 2019).

5 Conclusion

On January 27, 2018, Vladimir Putin celebrated nineteen years of leadership in Russia, becoming the country's longest-running ruler since Josef Stalin, surpassing the equally long-lived Soviet ruler Leonid Brezhnev.

Putin chose not to hold any celebrations on the occasion, which would have been common in the Soviet period. According to Glasser (2019), Putin does not want to be compared to Soviet leaders, who are remembered in Russia as overly authoritarian and inefficient and whose geopolitical strategy ultimately resulted in failure.

In a lengthy interview to the *Financial Times* on June 27, 2019, Putin celebrated the decline of Western liberalism and multiculturalism, a model that European powers had been exporting to other countries for decades.

Asked which world leader he admires most, Putin did not hesitate: "Peter the Great." When it was pointed out that Peter was already dead, he stated: "Peter will live as long as his cause is alive" (PUTIN, 2019).

Given that the cause of Peter the Great was the creation and strengthening of the Russian Empire, what would the guiding principles of Russia's national strategy be under Putin's leadership? As has been shown in this study, the following main points help answer this question:

- The main geopolitical areas of interest are included in or near the region defined by Mackinder as the Heartland (Fig. 1), and are basically Eastern Europe, the Baltic, the Arctic, the Black Sea region and the Middle East (Syria).
- Any NATO action in Eastern Europe and on Russian borders will be considered a first-rate threat;
- The resumption of the nuclear arms race (with advanced technologies) is a high-risk gamble, as it may represent the end of the balance of terror; however, it is deemed inevitable in the realistic context of Russian strategy;
- At the multilateral level, the BRICS are of great relevance and will continue to play a prominent role in the multilateral facet of Russian national strategy;
- If the current level of budget disbursement is sustained, by 2025 Russia's military resources (conventional and nuclear) will provide effective support for foreign policy, with capability for power projection anywhere in the world. Funding for other social priorities, however, may be compromised; and
- The goal of maintaining its status as a global military power and becoming one of the top five economies worldwide is a major national project, funded primarily by hydrocarbon exports and the sacrifice of other public budget priorities;

This study also identified potential obstacles to the development of Russia's national strategy, among them:

- Increasing loss of workforce, with the prospect of population decline;
- Low industrial capacity, which has not yet recovered from its collapse after the breakdown of the USSR. In this sense, substantial investment is required in areas such as development of alternative energy sources, mastery of sensitive technologies and adaptability to the challenges of the 4th Industrial Revolution;
- President Putin's declining popularity may lead to internal political instability, threatening the continuity of the strategies outlined in the current government;
- The heavy reliance on international oil prices may be a major obstacle to funding planned investments, whether in infrastructure or particularly in the military area, as falling world oil prices directly affect Russia's capacity to implement strategic projects; and
- The possible emergence of a prolonged global economic crisis may directly affect the strategies outlined by the Russian government.

Although said obstacles are considerable, it is observed that the Russian Federation has heavily invested its political, economic and military capital to occupy a prominent position within the international system, resuming the geopolitical line built up over the Russian Empire and Soviet Union periods.

Putin harbors the dream of someday equaling the status of the country's greatest historical figure and founder of the Russian Empire. It is an ambitious personal goal.

One should remember that the cause advocated by Peter the Great involved the rise of Russia to be a first-rate Eurasian power. By embracing this cause, Putin, as today's main Russian leader, pursues an equally ambitious geopolitical goal.

Threats and opportunities must be perceived and evaluated by other global actors, Brazil included.

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