Russia and Challenges of the 21st Century

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It is common knowledge that the interests of a sovereign and independent country, its economic and political interests, in the first place, cannot always and everywhere be identical to those of other countries, and that the differences existing between them hold a confrontational potential and are sources of hazard. Differences in particular generate political intentions, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, practical actions countries take to look after their interests by transforming their practical actions into all sorts of threats and challenges. Nor is Russia an exception in this respect: the probability of hazards, threats, and challenges to its security projected by the fast-changing world will certainly remain in the medium term.

To our mind, the concept “challenge” itself may be interpreted as a problem (a combination of similar or related problems) that, for some reason, was at one time given an unsavory resonance and is now perceived with suspicion and resentment, a problem that has a priority for a country’s national security and national interests, one that is pushed into the foreground by a moment in “history” or geopolitical opponents and that calls for an assessment and an adequate response.¹ What is more, the challenges of civilization, too, have definite sources and a dimensional vector (for example, the economic challenge to Russia is posed by the world’s most developed countries). Not every problem, though, is a challenge: challenges originate at a particular time and place, and they face a particular country at a particular period of its development. Moreover, they become challenges because they are perceived as such.

In the view of many experts, many challenges to Russia’s security today are exactly that because the state, civil society, and the ruling elite afford a pretext for challenges to be thrown to them by their policies, behavior, and all they do. Russia’s chief problem today is not even the economy in a period of reforms it is going through – rather, it is the psychology of a Third World country, loss of ability to take a critical look at itself, and lack of ambitions and demands as regards the quality of the nation state we live in. The ideological vacuum today and Russia’s national interests still unidentified and undeveloped are a major hindrance to reforms and effective foreign and domestic policies.
The new, postindustrial 21st century has not brought peace and prosperity to the overwhelming majority of countries. Indeed, a very small number of countries in Europe, America, and Asia could adapt to the new conditions, but they, too, have many people who are dissatisfied with their lives. In general, the picture of the world in the 21st century is dominated by a number of negative global factors that provoke instability in several regions. These are, in the first place, the depletion of nonrenewable natural resources, the continuing division of spheres of influence, centers of power still in the process of formation, national and confessional differences, and the deterioration of the environment in the world at large. These problems apply in full to Russia, as well.

The 21st century is an age of globalization and the transformation of the world into a “big village,” in which national borders are washed over by economic, financial, and information currents. What does all this bode for Russia?

Globalization has affected all sides of human lives, including security. The zone of durable peace that includes North America, European Union countries and NATO, Russia, China, India, Japan, Australia, most of Latin America, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, the RSA, and several other countries has expanded lately. It is, however, experiencing the growing effect of the security-short zone (the Middle East, Central Asia, most of Africa and Southeast Asia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans), which has become even less stable than it was before.

By contributing to a rise in national identity in most countries of the world, globalization will, in the not too distant future, lead to growth in the number of independent countries. When the United Nations Organization was created after World War II, it was joined by 50 countries, while today the Organization has 190 members out of the nearly 230 countries existing in the world. This number may increase several times over within the next 50 years as the principle of territorial integrity is, and probably will be, rolling back in the face of another principle – the right of nations to self-determination. Large multi-ethnic countries, including Russia, will be confronted with the growing problem of separatism. In turn, developed one-nation countries will increasingly be outliving their usefulness in the same way as national borders are erased in Western Europe before our eyes.

In economic policy, large transnational corporations (TNCs) are calling the tune today. Every day, two trillion dollars are turning over on the world financial market, many times the annual gross domestic product (GDP) of a great majority of the world’s countries, including Russia. An analysis of the leading TNCs’ economic policy trends and scale of operations leads us to the conclusion that their economic muscle might soon even surpass the power of the world’s major countries. This predicates a rise in the role of nongovernmental participants in international relations in identifying foreign policy priorities of various countries of the world.

As international big business expands, the pressure of influential nongovernmental organizations, international movements and communities, and all
sorts of informal clubs results in the states as agents of international law being actually stripped of their monopoly to exercise their powers and shape the destinies of the world. Even now, Microsoft Company or the Greenpeace non-governmental organization have more leverage to influence worldwide processes than that of a good half of the UN member countries. Russia is, and will be in the longer term, exposed to the pressure applied by these forces that are attempting to place its territories rich in mineral resources under their control and, still more important, impose their own system of values and views, and erode the nation’s uniqueness and identity from within.

Until very recently, humankind could rely on the experience it had accumulated over millennia of its history to adopt measures in facing up to threats of any kinds. Traditional instruments of world politics continued to perform well in the closing years of the 20th century in resolving traditional forms of conflicts and keeping society secure from military threats. Classical economics provided management technologies that steered the human community clear of world economic crises and consequently made the economy a secure pursuit to engage in. Clear-cut rules of interaction in a capitalist or socialist model helped, within the stable bounds of their spheres of influence, maintain crime and violence at a relatively low level in society as a whole – few threats, if any, were posed to personal security.

In our day, this historical experience is almost of no use as humanity is confronted with challenges and threats of a kind unknown to it that it is yet to adapt to and develop a response to each and every one of them. Maintaining personal security is first priority – security in the broadest possible sense extending to all aspects of an individual’s life and work. Uncertainty of threats brewing elsewhere explains the agitation sweeping many leading countries of the world.

Even though the development trends of the international situation in the medium term are clearly recognized today, the current situation can hardly be projected mechanically into the future. In all probability, confrontation, and very tough at that, between World North and World South will go on. As a leftover from preceding geopolitical structures, differences between East and West will survive unchanged, and, not improbable, new ones will crop up and, regrettably, be transformed in many respects into a problem of relationships between Russia and the Western community.

No matter how much hotheads on both shores of the Atlantic are tempted and want to live in a world without Russia, or to manage it as a colony, this is hardly in the cards. The age of ideological antagonism and confrontation has been put behind us, and the world community as a whole accepts the significance of Russia as a geopolitical and economic player on the civilization scene and displays interest in it along the following main lines:

- As an opponent (competitor or adversary) in the field of strategic weapons, in the first place. Russia’s geopolitical competition, particularly in the economic field, is not taken seriously so far;
As a source of natural resources, although Russia’s role in this area has been scaled down significantly after the breakup of the U.S.S.R.;

As a potential partner in maintaining regional and global equilibrium, such as a component of peacekeeping (stabilizing) forces;

As still a significant and often a conclusive argument good enough to parade, from time to time, in front of partners (opponents), the public, and so on;

As an important infrastructure bridge (transit corridor); and

As a “geopolitical security band,” a shock-absorber relative to instability zones and global “implacable opposition.”

In the view of a number of analysts, all this could, provided there is enough will, be rated as threats to Russia (even economic cooperation and foreign investments could, indeed, under certain circumstances, become an instrument to control and to “kill” it in the geopolitical sense5). By applying a tested approach, however, even the confrontational elements of interaction with the outside world can be used in Russia’s interests, deriving certain benefits, and nudging the world toward a different perception of Russia and toward directed transformation of the existing world order (in Russia’s interests).

An analysis of the situation developing around Russia shows that the challenges confronting it today originate from the old superpower “complexes” (for example, in the military and political areas), that is, the emergence of “challenges” in most instances depends on its readiness to view a specific problem as that, to respond to it, and be provoked into giving a response. On the one hand, challenges left without an adequate response prevent Russia from being integrated into the world community and, on the other hand, as Russia’s integration gets under way, many of what are challenges today may cease to be that. At least (and really important), they would not be upgraded into real threats to this country’s security.6

Significant progress achieved in all areas of the life of society in the 20th century has aggravated significantly the civilization problems to which Russia is exposed as well. In the first place, this applies to problems associated with the key resources that allow humanity to move on, in particular, foodstuffs, clean water, and clean air. In the ages gone by, shortages of these resources in individual countries and groups of population in them were explained predominantly by social causes. In the 20th century, however, the Earth’s civilization and its increasing impaction Nature came to a line beyond which it faced plain physical depletion of its potential.7 In these conditions, conflict generating factors are related for the Russian Federation above all to the supply of resources it needs for economic development. This circumstance arises from the acceleration of worldwide trends brought about by, more than anything else, the booming growth of the planet’s population after World War II (from 1.6 billion in 1900
to 5 billion in 1990, to 6.5 billion in 2000, and, according to forecasts, to between 8 and 8.5 billion in 2020) and the uncontrolled intensification of its manufacturing industries (more natural resources have been processed in the past 25 to 30 years than over all preceding human history). Accordingly, learning to use vital resources rationally, as we understand this challenge, is a global task that suggests solution of a group of problems caused by human influence on the Earth’s surface and climate. Their list typically includes soil degradation, shortage of clean water, deforestation, and global warming. All these problems are related to Russia in the most direct way and can hardly be resolved satisfactorily without its participation.

To fully understand and develop ways to eliminate existing and potential threats posed for the Russian Federation, it is essential, in our view, to systematize them and develop a mechanism to assess them.

- **First**, it is important to reduce the number of challenges significantly, screen them off carefully, and to establish what is really a challenge and what is not, as it requires the least possible efforts to neutralize (respond to) it, for example, by showing the flag, making a diplomatic maneuver, or a few demonstrative steps, or even doing nothing in the conditions of the emerging world order.

- **Second**, it is worthwhile to shortlist challenges among those identified a response to which can be put off because they are not direct challenges to Russia at this point of history.

- **Third**, if a challenge is menacing to Russia today, a practical response is to be given to it only after the situation has been assessed in the coordinate system of objectives and tasks versus the country’s real potentialities. Assessment will help find optimal and effective responses, measures, and means, with a ceiling put on their costs and involving minimum political consequences in the short and longer terms. An important consideration, no response can be given to challenges or threats beaten off without appreciating how real they are, unless they are the oft-repeated and extrapolated old clichés typical of a bipolar world.

In principle, Russia’s objective now that it is a country of the second geopolitical grade (Russia is a superpower only to the extent that it has hefty nuclear muscles) is to avoid getting stuck in the second-league obscurity of world geopolitics and to climb up out of it to the top echelon. Far from everything in overall power being measured today in terms of military (still less military power based on arithmetic quantities), Russia can only make its “way up” by effecting a really innovative breakthrough. Probably, the main challenge to this country does not come from its geopolitical opponents – it is a challenge of the time, a challenge it throws to itself. Unless Russian society’s psychology is transformed profoundly and radically and a dependable ideology giving consideration
to both the specific Russian mentality and requirements of modern development is produced, Russia will be condemned to remain a “recuperating” member of the world club and be discriminated against at every turn, and will hardly take the place it deserves in the new world order.

It is to come to a realization that its achievements in foreign affairs will remain an insignificant fact unless the world community recognizes it as an economically strong partner in international relations, a military power guided by an ideology, responsible, with a sense of dignity, and rid of incompetent experimenting.

The argument popular with certain quarters in Russia that “no one threatens us” looks fine in theory only. It is enough to recall that the “objective” course of history has been jerked out of people’s control many times. Today that the welfare of the world’s developed countries and fabulous business profits are at stake, and even more so tomorrow when it is a matter of survival in a world of diminishing resources “unjustly” distributed, as many people hold in the West, by Nature among different countries, Russia’s weakness may provide a dangerous provoking factor to its opponents. Russia has to be prepared for any eventualities and avoid tempting other powers by remaining feeble in the name of “peace around the world.” For these reasons, it has to possess economic, political, and, not least, military might strong enough to cope with possible threats posed to its security.

NOTES:
8. V.M. Zakharov, Strategicheskaya stabil’nost’ (Strategic Stability), RISI, Moscow, 2001.