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New Threats

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THREATS TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY: WHAT CAN COME OUT OF THE STRATEGIES OF GREAT POWERS?	3
<i>Yevhen Sapolovych and Khrystyna Holynska</i>	
INTERNATIONAL POLITICS – A PERIL FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY? WHAT SHAPED THE COVID-19 CRISIS.....	11
<i>Laura Zghibarta</i>	
NATO AND COVID-19: LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES AHEAD.....	22
<i>Hennadiy A. Kovalenko</i>	
NEW WORLD OF PANDEMICS AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES.....	32
<i>Iaroslav Chornogor and Iryna Izhutova</i>	
DOUBLE CHALLENGE: THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND THE GLOBAL INFODEMIC	41
<i>Yevhen Mahda</i>	
COVID-19 AND THE SURVEILLANCE STATE: A NEW PRETEXT FOR LIMITING PERSONAL FREEDOMS AND DISSENT IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE	49
<i>Eimear O’Casey</i>	
BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES’ RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS A SECURITY THREAT: FROM VIOLATING INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS TO DEEPENING THE STATE’S VULNERABILITY	57
<i>Stefania Kolarz</i>	
HYBRID WARFARE AS A THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY	67
<i>Margarita Biryukova</i>	
THE IRANIAN WAY TO THE STARS: WHY IRAN’S SPACE PROGRAMME CAN BE DANGEROUS FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY	76
<i>Oleksandr Cheban</i>	

THREATS TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY: WHAT CAN COME OUT OF THE STRATEGIES OF GREAT POWERS?

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Frequently international threats result from the way states define their interests and aims – be it conflicts caused by the great powers' competition or reluctance to cooperate in tackling persisting global challenges like the climate change or emerging ones like the current pandemic. In this paper, we analyse the latest strategic documents of the key international security players – five permanent UN Security Council members (the USA, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France) and G4 countries (Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil). The authors draw on this analysis to identify threats to international security that come from the stated intentions of the most powerful nations.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic yet once again put governments across the entire planet to test. The previous sudden success of ISIS information and military campaigns, as well as many other emerging or presumptive threats coming from terrorist groups, forced the power-holders to rethink their approaches to recognising possible sources of threats and preventing them. They started to look beyond countries and territories. Cyberattacks and leaks of classified information reassured them in this decision, as the danger may come from anywhere and cause significant disruptions in government operations. A tiny virus, locking millions at home and yet finding ways to take hundreds of thousands of lives, is even more negligent of borders and political regimes.

This trend can be clearly seen in security-related texts produced by governments. In

their speeches, countries' and international organisations' leaders talk about the interconnected world and the threats' becoming increasingly global. National security and foreign policy strategies are in the same framework. Global threats, such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and the like, get a large share of space in their texts. Being centred on the national interests of the countries, such strategic documents take these explicit challenges to the safety and well-being of their citizens as the most important focus of their policies.

While the significance of the abovementioned perils should by no means be diminished, the analysis of the potential global threats should go beyond those on the surface. With this paper being written in the midst of a pandemic, it may seem ironic to claim that the realisation of threats like these is highly unlikely (except for the climate change, which requires immediate and coordinated

reaction). Even terrorist attacks are, to some extent, “black swans” with enormously high impact (followed by extensive media coverage) but low probability. The threats coming from assertive behaviour of the nations across the world are, on the contrary, happening daily. Attempts of one country to influence the other(s) politically, economically, diplomatically, and even militarily are taking place every day and may cause immediate danger.¹



While some states' intentions remain latent, a significant part of them is actually quite explicitly stated in their strategic documents (e.g., foreign policy concepts, national security doctrines), which can be used to derive the course of action that a state is most likely to pursue in the future

Assertive behaviour of countries can be identified in a number of ways. While some states' intentions remain latent, a significant part of them is actually quite explicitly stated in their strategic documents (e.g., foreign policy concepts, national security doctrines), which can be used to derive the course of action that a state is most likely to pursue in the future, serving as either a cause or a solution to an emerging/existing threat. National security, defence, and foreign policy doctrines cannot be an exhaustive source of such potentially assertive actions, but they are public statements that have an evident

political purpose to articulate a country's perspectives.² They are externally oriented, as the government's focus, selected tone, and choice of words, etc. can serve as a reference for policy-makers both at home and abroad.

The scope of this study is limited to the text analysis of the latest strategic documents of the states with a substantial impact on international security – the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the USA, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France) and G4 countries (Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil). The authors draw on this analysis to identify the threats to international security that come from the stated intentions of these most powerful nations. We look beyond the surface risks and challenges described almost identically by these countries and attempt to find the sources of possible assertive behaviour in any of the domains – political, economic, informational, diplomatic, or military. These intentions are not plentiful across the documents but signify the distinct interests and concerns that the states pay special attention to. We will first provide general remarks on the distinct features of the security and defence documents of each of the abovementioned states, followed by reflections on general trends.

Analysis of Strategic Documents

National security strategy (NSS) documents of **Brazil**³ are written on the premise that the conflicts of today and tomorrow are drastically different from those of the past. The world is unlikely to face yet another great war, but the lesser scale does not necessarily mean smaller scope. The conflicts will still

- 1 S. De Spiegeleire, *From Assertiveness to Aggression: 2014 as a Watershed Year for Russian Foreign and Security Policy*, “HCSS StratMon”, Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2015 [https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12566.1].
- 2 C. McKeon, *Contrasting Narratives: A Comparative Study of European and North American National Security Strategies*, “Rethinking Security”, March 2018 [https://rethinkingsecurityorguk.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/contrasting-narratives-march-2018.pdf].
- 3 *Política Nacional de Defesa e a Estratégia Nacional de Defesa*, Ministério da Defesa, 2020 [https://www.gov.br/defesa/pt-br/assuntos/copy_of_estado-e-defesa/estrategia-nacional-de-defesa].

revolve around borders and economic tensions, with natural resources being the most probable cause. While the world lacks these resources already, with more severe shortage to come, South America still has plenty of them, and that could be a source of a potential threat to Brazil. It is especially significant concerning the Brazilian Amazon, over which Brazil will reaffirm its sovereignty unconditionally. Otherwise, the NSS is written in very broad strokes, and such threats as terrorism or pandemics are mentioned quite vaguely. The view that Brazil has no real enemies still prevails.

In its primary national security documents, **China**⁴ unambiguously proclaims all the great powers as challengers. Although explicitly the country emphasises the desire to cooperate, it is impossible to overlook how hard it is trying to flex its muscles simultaneously. China asserts its undivided right to resolve its issues with Taiwan – preferably by political means, but also by force if needed. The same goes for Hong Kong. In both cases, China firmly warns that any possible intrusion from “external forces” may also be answered by forceful means.

A few things are worth mentioning. First, quite an extensive subsection goes deep into describing patrolling and military exercises, emphasising such activities in the East and South China Seas. Second, much attention is devoted to safeguarding the borders. The latter does not necessarily imply, at least not in all cases, any intent to redraw them. But along with such running themes as self-sufficiency and great military and economic power, as well as an assertion to settle all internal issues independently, it

seems like a warning to other great powers not to meddle with China’s interests, or else the consequences will be severe. In general, this document is a unique combination of cooperative spirit on the surface, assertive comments, and even explicitly drawn lines that should not be crossed, with quite a defensive tone overall. China goes into detail explaining its stance and how it is “forced” to behave in certain ways far more frequently than other countries do in their documents, and this also cannot go unnoticed.

The **French** national security strategy⁵, for the most part, follows the general patterns of security strategy documents of the EU countries. The focus is on the mutual responsibility of the EU members for defeating terrorism and safeguarding Europe from hybrid threats, as well as sanctioning and deterring perpetrators of disruption to the international order. There is, however, one domain where the assertiveness is barely hidden: France’s unabashed interest in retaining influence over the former colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel. It comes as no surprise given the economic importance of the region and many expatriates and citizens with dual nationalities (and, more broadly, the francophone communities that France is also determined to protect). The means to this end vary in the degree of assertiveness but go as far as bilateral defence agreements allowing France to deploy its troops in a country whenever it finds its interests endangered. In general, the right to both unilateral military intervention and defence is mentioned in several places across the document, which may indicate a potential source of assertive behaviour.

4 *China and the World in the New Era*, State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019 [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201909/27/content_WS5d8d80f9c6d0bcf8c4c142ef.html]; *China’s National Defense in the New Era*, State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019 [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html].

5 *Defence and National Security Strategic Review*, Government of the French Republic, 2017 [<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/layout/set/popup/content/download/520198/8733095/version/2/file/DEFENCE+AND+NATIONAL+SECURITY+STRATEGIC+REVIEW+2017.pdf>].

Germany's national security strategy⁶ starts from redefining the essence of a threat per se – in contemporary society, it should not be limited to the absence of war. Hence, the citizens' security should be treated as a multifaceted phenomenon, and the country must prepare to face possible challenges. A large share of those will be economic. Germany clearly identifies two regions with emerging economies (Asia and Latin America) as potential competitors that will overtake the German economy in volume. Although no specific actions in this regard are mentioned, the assertive tone is quite apparent. Another threat to international security and to Germany, in particular, is the behaviour of Russia. The document avoids going into details on other potential hotspots but elaborates widely on the risks brought about by the recent events in Ukraine, claiming that "Russia is openly calling the European peace order into question." While the statements remain quite diplomatically trite, the acknowledgment and persistent mentions of Russia as a threat in many instances throughout the document may signify a case worth exploring further.

India's national security strategy⁷ is, for the most part, very chequered and rarely utilises any explicitly coercive wording. The proclaimed attitudes are highly cooperative, and even India's own national policies are often criticised, which is quite uncommon for the documents of this kind. The only major exception is Pakistan, which is regarded as the most overt threat. Despite the attempts to resolve the conflict through diplomatic

and political means, the risk of direct military confrontation remains high. India goes as far as to claim a right to unilateral military intervention to neutralise terror groups that Pakistan hosts. While causing much distress with its growing military presence and influence in South Asia, China is viewed as the primary challenger mostly in the economic domain. The growing influence of an already mighty neighbour is regarded as a definite threat, and scepticism over possible trading or other partnerships is clearly articulated. It is once again atypical for security strategies, known for plentiful instances of reverence, even towards the most likely foes.

Japan's national security strategy⁸ is exceptionally reserved. China and North Korea are exposed as the main sources of risk, but no concrete measures to counter them are named. It ought to be noted that the NSS has not been reviewed or updated since 2013, but there are other more recent defence and security documents, of which the 2018 National Defence Program Guidelines is the most relevant to our analysis.⁹ Suffice it to say that it is also much chequered, albeit more concerned about the emerging threats and uncertainties as well as the potential need to defend against more powerful adversaries. Russia is added to the overview of risk-generating countries, although the wording is somewhat blurry. Similar to the 2013 NSS, special attention is paid to the cooperation with the US, which is seen as a central pillar of Japanese security, perhaps even more so than the national military.

6 *White Paper on German Security Policy and The Future of Bundeswehr*, Federal Government, 2016 [<https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/111704/2027268/2016>].

7 *India's National Security Strategy*, Government of India, 2019 [https://manifesto.inc.in/pdf/national_security_strategy_gen_hooda.pdf].

8 *National Security Strategy*, Cabinet of Japan, 2013 [http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/96_abe/documents/2013/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NSS.pdf].

9 *National Defense Program Guidelines*, Cabinet of Japan, 2018 [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf].

Russia's NSS documents¹⁰ closely resemble the United States of America's one in their quite explicit listing of potential threats to international security. While other countries are more abstract in this regard, talking mostly about common challenges such as terrorism or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction with relatively rare mentions of specific risks, Russia, on the contrary, starts by expressing its desire to increase its dominance in the world and goes on describing very concrete actions that it will take and which can serve as sources of assertive behaviour.

These include the support of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent nations, and direct opposition to "ex-territorial activities of the US" and further eastward expansion of NATO. Such behaviour is assertive in the sense that Russia uses both hard and soft power to ensure that its influence over the neighbouring territories remains strong. As the recent history clearly illustrates, such a stance can be very easily turned from assertiveness to aggression.¹¹ The documents pay particular attention also to the eastern borders of Russia, as those are in close proximity to several unstable or potentially threatening territories. Ukraine is mentioned using negative rhetoric (anti-constitutional riot, open support from the West for radical solutions for internal conflict, etc.). No specific actions were mentioned in this context, but the events as a whole are framed as being entirely

anti-Russian. Furthermore, the documents express a clear intention to further develop the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and transform it into a full-fledged military union, providing a capable alternative to the existing ones.

The **United Kingdom's** NSS¹² places a strong emphasis on soft power and spreading British values as an efficient mode of deterrence of potential adversaries. It will be achieved through an increase in financing of diplomatic services, deepening of expertise on the regions that may prove risky (Russia, China, Arab nations), target awards (i.e., fellowships) for highly skilled individuals to study in the UK, expanding and improving the services of the British Council, the BBC World Service, and the like. The general tone of the document is quite similar to that of the USA – nationalistic and from a power stance. Like many other countries, the UK mentions Russia as an immediate threat to Europe and the world. Still, it places less emphasis on it than, for instance, Germany does, listing Russia's recent actions among others, such as Syria, Iraq, China.

The National Security Strategy of the **United States of America**¹³ is arguably the most overtly assertive document of all in this review, which may be attributed to a number of factors, but particularly to the Republican Party's outlook on international policy. The general tone is borderline nationalistic, with rich praises for America's exceptionalism

10 В. Путин, Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В. В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.) (*Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on 30 November 2016*), President of the Russian Federation, 2016 [<http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451>]; Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 31 декабря 2015 года "О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации" (*Decree of the President of the Russian Federation from 31 December 2015 On the Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation*), Pub. L. No. 683, 2015 [<http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391/page/1>].

11 De Spiegeleire, n1.

12 *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, Great Britain, 2015 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf].

13 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, White House, 2017 [<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>].

and reprehension of its many rivals and enemies throughout most of the text. Many of the stated intentions are quite vague but coercive in nature, even towards the closest allies in the EU (enforcing fair trade and greater dedication to collective security). Also very noticeable is the emphasis on unilateral action. Although acknowledging the importance of cooperation, the US is ready to single-handedly take any steps it assumes necessary to pursue its interests, be it economic measures (most noticeably exemplified by the ongoing trade war with China) or use of coercive force (as demonstrated by the increasing tensions with Iran, so far having culminated in the takedown of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in January of this year). Another distinct feature of the United States' NSS is the strong anti-immigration sentiment, which comes along with the promises of impenetrable borders and strict law enforcement. Nevertheless, the US is willing to expand its global influence via soft power means.

General Trends

Having described the specific interests and assertive behaviours through which the great powers project their might, we would like to shift focus to more general trends and patterns. Most of the NSSs cover a vast but similar set of topics and domains; thus, here we will try to underline the issues that we find particularly important and/or distressing.

The most common and general threats lie on the surface and are present across the documents. First, great powers are much more overt in their assertive and coercive claims directed towards smaller states than ones of their own size. While, say, the regimes of North Korea and Iran are universally condemned and treated as

adversaries, the attitude towards Russia and China is leaning towards more neutral tones. In some particular cases, the rhetoric used gravitates to more cooperation than deterrence and sanctioning. This softer and more ambiguous stance towards some of the violators of the international order and human rights leaves them with the latitude to sustain their aggressive foreign and domestic policies.



great powers are much more overt in their assertive and coercive claims directed towards smaller states than ones of their own size

Second, weapons of mass destruction remain one of the most menacing issues breeding mutual distrust and new insecurities. All states in the list (except Japan for apparent reasons, but including Germany through NATO) justify the possession of nuclear arsenals as the means necessary to ensure their security, and at the same time vow to counter proliferation on a global scale. While uncertainties, distrust, and existence of WMDs fuel each other, the gravest dangers persist, and a scenario in which a terrorist group gains access to them remains plausible (which is also recognised by the documents, making them even more internally controversial in this regard).

The boundaries of space policy are a less pronounced issue, but just as important. They remain largely undefined for all states.¹⁴ All national strategic documents in this review claim rights for unrestricted access to outer space for purposes such as exploration, commerce, and defence. The

¹⁴ Although quite a few treaties have been signed in this domain since the 1960s, they can barely catch up with the advance in technology and the global power dynamics.

latter category is especially troubling and simultaneously hazy. It encompasses many phenomena, including reconnaissance satellites, anti-satellite and space-to-Earth weaponry. Very few countries speak out openly against the militarisation of outer space, and those that do (most notably Russia) may do so out of fear of being the underdogs in deploying such systems. Global tensions between the great powers, therefore, increasingly threaten to turn the space race into an arms race.

The things that the major powers' NSS are silent or not verbose about are just as important. When the world was caught off guard with the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the prospects of such an outbreak had not been considered seriously enough by any of the powerful international actors. Most, though not all, documents under scrutiny mentioned the threat of pandemics, either caused by natural reasons or artificially manufactured. The NSS of the US, for instance, mentions SARS and Ebola outbreaks as the omen of future global epidemics. These sections, however, are commonplace and extremely short, which clearly indicates their low priority.

The UK goes further, elaborating in more detail both the risks from a natural disease outbreak and the use of biomaterials for a directed attack. But overall, the NSSs of great powers serve as another proof of inability to develop any joint strategy to prevent or reduce the consequences of biological threats, despite the many warnings from the scientific community.

This poses a question of how many other potential dangers are overlooked in these powerful nations' agendas. The ones that come to mind immediately are climate change, degradation of the environment,

and exhaustion of natural resources. Most countries mention them as serious issues to be dealt with swiftly and in cooperation. Suffice it to say, these document sections are not any longer or more specific than those on pandemics.

The stances of Russia and the United States deserve special attention. Russia claims that climate change, albeit posing severe risks to all of humanity, is used as an instrument of political and economic coercion against it.¹⁵ The US warns that environmental regulations are secondary to economic freedom, and will not be tolerated if they put excessive restraints on industries.¹⁶ In essence, these two cases are just the most overt examples of the states' unwillingness to sacrifice short- to medium-term interests in favour of sustainability, especially if that implies even a minuscule restriction on their sovereignty.



When the world was caught off guard with the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the prospects of such an outbreak had not been considered seriously enough by any of the powerful international actors

Yet the explicit dangers should not hinder the challenges that are not framed as such but serve as a source of assertive action of a country. While being mostly veiled by other statements and rarely clearly phrased, these threats have a significantly higher probability rate, as they describe the actions that a country might take as retaliation against the "other side". The struggle against other "big" global threats has been

¹⁵ Putin, n10.

¹⁶ *National Security Strategy*, n13.

ongoing for years and did not succeed in preventing the tensions between the states, these tensions being economic (trade wars) or even open small-scale armed conflicts. And those are also explicitly stated in the documents, quite clearly marking potential friends and foes.

Great powers claim rights, and sometimes even express explicit dedication to unilateral actions. Multilateral institutions, such as the UN, will remain largely ineffective. Cooperation against global threats will be limited (pandemics, climate change, terrorism, air pollution, data regulation, space). This can only further exacerbate those issues, as great powers often see each other as main threats, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Several possible flashpoints can lead to a direct confrontation that includes global powers – Taiwan, Hong Kong, South China Sea, and India–Pakistan.

Another hotspot of assertiveness (and the events of the past months serve as a proof) can be found by examining further the competition/conflict between China and the West in a broad sense, mostly represented by the US. Moreover, not only the immediate neighbours are quite frightened by the rise of China, and might be willing to undertake some assertive actions (most likely in the economic domain) to confront Beijing, but also the EU members that regard this country as a serious competitor.

Conclusions

National security strategies are documents written in a very thought-through tone and marked by a deliberate choice of every word. Thus, they should by no means be treated as a directory for future actions. These documents are quite similar in their more general parts, recognising the common and well-known global threats

such as terrorism, climate change, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and expressing a clear intention to join international coalition in attempting to tackle them.

Nevertheless, careful consideration of the countries mentioned in the documents, the tone used to describe relationships with them, and interests that a country openly claims to pursue, all taken together, can be used to identify potential sources of assertive behaviour in diplomatic, economic, and military domains, as well as the dangerous blind spots in the state policies. In some documents, the country's desire to achieve a certain objective is expressed clearly, while in others, it is obscured by carefully weighed diplomatic wordings. But at any rate, the threats that can be derived from some documents are more immediate, clear, and significant; thus, they should not be ignored.

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