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The US National Security Document and the Return of Geopolitics to Eurasia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The new National Security Strategy of the US enumerates the major problems and challenges facing the US and its institutions, as well as the policies Washington plans to adopt to carry out its foreign policy agenda. Though the major thrusts of the document are relatively close to what US statesmen have expressed over the past few years, it can be argued that the new strategy signals a significant development in the US approach to foreign relations: the return of geopolitics.

On December 18, 2017, the US government unveiled the country's new National Security Strategy. The document states unequivocally that "after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, the great power competition has returned." This is a striking admission by the White House. Although in Europe, Russia, and elsewhere, the position of the new strategy document raised eyebrows, politicians in some parts of the Middle East as well as the South Caucasus (particularly Georgia) and Ukraine think it is well attuned to the geopolitical situation on the ground in the region.

The overall tone of the document indicates that Washington has begun to realize that the post-Cold War approach to Eurasia did nothing to ensure a lasting peace or a furthering of American state interests.

The Russian military resurgence in the former Soviet Union, the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific, and Iran's successes in Syria have exacerbated the security situation across Eurasia. Geopolitical differences have reduced potential US-Russia cooperation on a number of issues (with the exception of counter-terrorism). The era of post-Cold War hopes for a lasting cooperation and peace in the post-Soviet space and elsewhere has officially ended. "[Future US

strategy] is a strategy of principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology," the document reads.

A bit of history

Over the past couple of centuries, political realism (foreign policy based on the balance of power and geopolitical calculations) and its German version (realpolitik) have been scaled back on occasion by notions built on ideological and ethical premises. In 1815, during the Congress of Vienna, European statesmen worked hard to build a lasting peace across the continent following the devastating Napoleonic wars. However, Napoleon III, Bismarck, Wilhelm II, and the Third French Republic destroyed the foundations of ethical politics, which led to the resurgence of realpolitik and the return of geopolitics. WWI followed, which ended with another hope for lasting peace after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Again, the subsequent rise of totalitarian governments in Germany, Italy, and Russia (1920-1930s) led to foreign policies based on geopolitical calculations that ultimately culminated in WWII.

The third era of expected prosperity and peace was the post-Cold War period, but here too, political realism has been slowly emerging as a dominant force across Eurasia. Hopes of lasting peace tend to emerge after brutal military and ideological wars, but all previous historical examples show that geopolitics are never fully replaced by moral principles in foreign policy.

International relations have never been free of geopolitical thinking to one degree or another. The new Trump document, which has now formally ushered in the end of ethical and moral premises in international relations and heralded the return of geopolitics, is an expected step and one rooted in the experience of past generations.

This thinking is well summarized in the following quote from the document, which notes increased competition among various powers in Eurasia: "These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades, policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false."

The new strategy also states that "the United States will respond to the growing political, economic, and military competition we face around the world. China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control

information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.” The nature of the fundamental threat emanating from Russia is also reflected in the fact that North Korea and Iran, both of which have nuclear programs, feature only after China and Russia, as do assorted transnational terrorist groups.

At the same time, it is important to stress that the return to Brzezinski-esque geopolitics by the US government did not happen overnight. It was the result of constant challenges to the US-led world order by such powers as Russia, Iran, and others over the past decade.

The rhetoric of the new US strategy is a positive development for Israel (pressured by the resurgent Iran) in the Middle East, as well as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova in the former Soviet space. It is well-attuned to the unstable situation currently prevailing across Eurasia. Signs of stronger US engagement in Eurasia were already seen throughout 2017.

Overall it would be fair to say that the rhetoric of the document reflects the prevailing thinking in the White House, indicating that relations between the US and other major players in Eurasia such as Russia and Iran will now be more difficult to normalize. At the same time, geopolitical frictions among the big players will expose small states to ever more serious geopolitical challenges.

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