

CBHJQQ

GEOSTRATEGIC TERRITORIES: THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT, FEATURES, AND DEFINITION CRITERIA



V. A. Kolosov

O. I. Vendina

A. A. Gritsenko

M. V. Zotova

M. S. Karpenko

A. B. Sebentsov

N. L. Turov

Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia
29 Staromonetnyi Pereulok, Moscow, 119017, Russia

Received 28 August 2025

Accepted 12 January 2026

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2026-1-1

© Kolosov V. A., Vendina O. I., Gritsenko A. A., Zotova M. V., Karpenko M. S., Sebentsov A. B., Turov N. L., 2026

The term ‘geostrategic territory’ was introduced in the Spatial Development Strategies of the Russian Federation, adopted in 2019 and 2024. However, the principles for identifying such territories remained ambiguous, with no clear priorities or differentiation criteria specified. This study aims to conduct a substantive analysis of the concept of geostrategy and its derivatives across various fields of scholarly knowledge, drawing on both international and Russian literature. Historically, in international scholarship, geostrategy was associated primarily with military geography and geopolitics. Today, geostrategic analysis encompasses not only the potential use of military force beyond national borders but also the pursuit of national interests through non-military means. In Russia, a strategic territory is defined as a region facing actual or potential external threats to its security, necessitating specific policy measures to eliminate or mitigate their consequences. The term ‘geostrategic territory’ refers to the sources of such threats — specifically, a territory’s position within a multi-scale spatial system of network structures. External challenges are closely intertwined with internal ones, including the need to overcome economic backwardness, poverty, depopulation, and related socio-economic problems. The analysis demonstrates that a geostrategic po-

To cite this article: Kolosov, V. A., Vendina, O. I., Gritsenko, A. A., Zotova, M. V., Karpenko, M. S., Sebentsov, A. B., Turov, N. L. 2026, Geostrategic territories: the history of the concept, features, and definition criteria, *Baltic Region*, vol. 18, № 1, p. 4–22, doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2026-1-1

sition is dynamic and historically contingent, shaped by the geostrategic characteristics of individual settlements and strategic facilities. At the same time, similar geostrategic properties may also characterise extensive macro-regions encompassing several administrative units (e. g., the Arctic or the Russian Far East). The assessment of geostrategic position is inherently discursive, depending not only on material factors but also on the civic identity of the population, including their perception of global political actors, assessment of national security threats, and attitudes toward neighbouring countries. The article concludes by proposing criteria for classifying geostrategic territories and offers a refined definition of the concept.

Keywords:

geostrategic territories, spatial development, strategic planning, national security, regional policy, geostrategy, geopolitics

Introduction

The term 'geostrategic territory' has only recently been introduced into Russian strategic and spatial planning practice. It was first employed in Russia's 2025 Spatial Development Strategy (referred to below as SDS-2019), which was devised to implement federal regulatory acts.¹ The drafting of these documents followed the mid-2010s introduction of a system for creating and updating regional and municipal development strategies. Strategising was to become a tool for mitigating territorial contrasts perceived as a threat to the country's territorial integrity. These disparities resulted from the concentration of economic and human potential in the largest cities, the rapid population decline in most other cities, towns, and villages, and the widening differences in personal income and quality of life both between regions and interregionally, between municipalities.

¹ On Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation, federal law of 28 June 2014, № 172-FZ, URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_164841/ (accessed 11.08.2025) ; On the Content, Composition, Procedure for the Development and Approval of the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation, as well as the Procedure for Monitoring and Controlling Its Implementation (alongside the Regulation on the Content, Composition, Procedure for the Development and Approval of the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation and the Proposals Prepared within It for Improving the Settlement System in the Territory of the Russian Federation and Priority Directions for the Placement of Productive Forces in the Territory of the Russian Federation; Rules for Monitoring and Controlling the Implementation of the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation), Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation dated 20.08.2015 № 870 (as amended on 24.06.2020), URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_185091/ (accessed 11.08.2025) ; On the Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for Regional Development of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2025, Presidential Decree of 16 January 2017 № 13, URL: <https://base.garant.ru/71587690/> (accessed 11.08.2025).

SDS-2019 defined geostrategic territories as ‘regions possessing a substantial significance for ensuring the socioeconomic development, territorial integrity and security of the Russian Federation’ characterised by ‘specific living and economic conditions’. The list of such territories comprised 47 Russian regions, i.e. more than half of the total number. Alongside the obvious candidates — the Republic of Crimea, Sevastopol and the Kaliningrad regions, which were exclaves at the time lacking an overland connection to mainland Russia — it included all other border regions of the country, as well as 25 territories located in the North Caucasus, Far East and the Arctic Zone.

As expected, the preparation and implementation of SDS-2019 prompted an animated critical discussion [1—4]. The literature highlighted that the architects of the document had not clearly defined what ‘geostrategic’ means. Geostrategic territories differ significantly in terms of their geographical location, population density, and demographic composition [5; 6]. For some regions, geopolitical position is a decisive factor, as in the Kaliningrad region and Primorski Krai, whereas in others, such as the Kurgan region, it has little impact on development rates and levels. The absence of established priorities and territorial differentiation created a risk that any regional policy in the area would devolve into a disordered mix of measures, further exacerbating spatial development disparities [1].

Another point of criticism towards the identification of geostrategic regions was insufficient operability. Throughout the years of SDS-2019 implementation, the category of geostrategic regions never appeared in any subsidiary regulations. Almost all geostrategic territories had already employed a diverse range of regional policy instruments within their geographical boundaries. Devising approaches to spatial development in such diverse regions evidently required grouping them and identifying tools tailored to the specific characteristics of each group.

A new version of SDS, covering the period up to 2030 with an outlook to 2036, takes account of criticisms of the initial strategy and offers multiple innovations. Yet, the list of geostrategic territories itself has not undergone significant changes, featuring the Republic of Crimea, Sevastopol and the Kaliningrad region, along with Far Eastern, North Caucasus and Arctic territories, most of them located at the national border. The remaining border regions have lost their geostrategic status. At the same time, the new Russian regions and municipalities of several western regions bordering on “unfriendly countries” have been included in the list. Geostrategic territories, therefore, continue to cover a substantial share of the country, comprising 29 regions in full as well as several municipalities, and accounting for 57 % of its total area. Development pathways and constraints have not been thoroughly elaborated either, with fundamental differences in the nature and characteristics of vulnerabilities overlooked, along with the peculiarities of local subcultures and population identities. The identification of current problems

is supplemented by a general framework for their resolution and an outline of expected outcomes, whereas the gravity of the situation requires concrete, location-specific knowledge.

The following sections focus on definitions of the terms ‘geostrategy’ and ‘geostrategic’ proposed by Russian and international authors, ways of interpreting the combination of their ‘geo’ and ‘strategic’ components, and possible criteria for classifying territories as geostrategic. This paper aims to address these aspects without claiming exhaustiveness or unambiguity in its findings.

What is geostrategy?

Internationally, geostrategic territories are generally defined as areas external to a given state yet possessing military, political, economic and symbolic significance for it.

Geostrategy emerged within military geography, one of the oldest branches of geographical science. The term was first used in 1855 by General Giacomo Durando, war minister of the Kingdom of Sardinia (Piedmont) [7]. However, it became firmly established in the scholarly literature of certain countries — primarily Germany, the United States, and France — only in the early twentieth century. From that time, geostrategy gradually differentiated itself from the geographical study of theatres of war and, from the late nineteenth century, became more closely associated with geopolitics.

In many studies, the broader use of the term ‘geostrategy’ is linked to the German school of geopolitics, especially following the works of the German geographer and geopolitician Karl Haushofer [8], who advanced the idea of *Wehrgeopolitik* (‘defence geopolitics’). Unlike military geography, this concept is future-oriented as it presupposes readiness to employ military force and operates with large spaces. This dimension of geostrategy was also highlighted by the eminent French geographer André Vigarié [9], who noted that geostrategy defines the selection of measures to defend against a potential adversary. Political geographer Stéphane Rosière [10] observed that geostrategy studies geographical space not only as an environment and theatre (arena of political and military activity) but also as an object (*enjeu*) of conflict.

The interpretation of geostrategy as a field of knowledge aimed at justifying territorial expansion, together with Haushofer’s links to the leadership of Nazi Germany, led to geostrategy and geopolitics being regarded as marginal disciplines in most countries worldwide during the postwar period until the 1980s [11]. However, after World War II, concepts of geostrategy continued to develop, and geostrategic research was conducted by various organisations and military academies in different countries. The term ‘geostrategy’ appeared regularly in

authoritative dictionaries. For example, the Encyclopaedia Britannica [12] linked it to military policy. The Merriam-Webster International Dictionary [13] defined geostrategy as ‘a branch of study of geopolitics dealing with questions concerning strategy’.

The diversification of methods and forms of spatial control in the postwar period, the emergence of military-political blocs and the escalation of international terrorism contributed to increased complexity in geostrategic analysis. It is no longer confined to examining the potential use of military force in specific regions but also encompasses a state’s capacity to influence various sectors — such as transport, energy, and agriculture — in countries within its sphere of influence. Overall, the 1980s rehabilitation of geostrategy and geopolitics ‘demilitarised’ these disciplines. The geostrategic models popularised by Zbigniew Brzezinski [14] and Henry Kissinger [15] rely much less on military force and far more on justifying methods of economic, informational and political dominance. Brzezinski considered geostrategy as strategic management of geopolitical interests, emphasising their dynamism and the need for active forecasting [14].

French geographer Hervé Couteau-Bégarié [16], following these authors, defined geostrategy as a state’s search for the most effective ways to transform (political) space in accordance with its interests, for example, by blocking communications, isolating a hostile state and its selected territories, fostering opposition to its political regime or establishing control over specific regions and settlements. Shortly thereafter, the concept of so-called *soft power* [17] gained popularity, suggesting that modern states are more likely to rely on threats of military force and demonstrations of capability rather than their full-scale use. Under this concept, geopolitical objectives are achieved through the creation of appealing images, information manipulation, and appeals to social perceptions and values. Similarly, Pascal Venier [18] argued that geostrategy is an applied branch of geopolitics, focused on developing comprehensive measures to advance a state’s interests beyond its borders, including the establishment of control over critical military assets. In his view, geostrategy is also connected to issues of national security and threats from actual and potential adversaries. He asserts that its focus is on the balance of military-political forces on the international stage, including the ability to project military power and exert control over space through the establishment of military bases. Typically, geostrategic research in this sense is conducted in major powers or regional-leading nations and aims to explain variations in a state’s approach to relations with specific countries and regions.

A perspective similar to the prevailing international view of geostrategy as an applied branch of geopolitics was, albeit rarely, adopted by Russian

authors. The term first appeared in Russian publications only in the 1990s. For example, Konstantin Sorokin distinguished between fundamental geopolitics, which examines the development of the planet's geopolitical space, and applied geopolitics (geostrategy), which provides recommendations for executing a state's or group of states' overall strategy on the global stage [19].

New global-scale threats, the intensification of strategic competition between leading centres of power, increasing multipolarity, the emergence of new virtual spaces and hybrid wars have contributed to the growing relevance of geostrategic research. The advent of geoinformation technologies, artificial intelligence and the expanding digital environment has also prompted a substantial renewal of the relevant methodological toolkit [7].

Despite these advances, no widely accepted understanding of the essence and objectives of geostrategy has emerged. Most authors consider geostrategy as an independent scientific field or a branch of geopolitics studying the relationship between geographical location, the territorial distribution of military, economic and political forces in the world, and other geographical factors, on the one hand, with national foreign policy strategies, on the other. The authoritative collective monograph *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History* [20], devoted to the theory of geostrategic studies, presents different interpretations of the term 'geostrategy'. Everett Dolman interprets geostrategy as a branch of geopolitics focusing on the application of new technologies based on geographic, topographic and positional data [21]. Gerard Toal argues that geopolitics in general, and geostrategy in particular, should not be confined to the relationship between space, politics and military power, and that in contemporary conditions, geographic images, myths and perceptions — constructed through discourse and relevant practices — play a key role [22].

Over the past twenty years, research has sought to develop a universal conception of the geostrategic character of a territory, regardless of whether it lies abroad or within a state's borders. Geoffrey Sloan [11], following the maxim that 'geography still matters', notes that any strategy with a spatial dimension is geostrategic. A similar view is shared by some Latin American researchers, who advance the concept of 'geostrategies of economic space'. This encompasses plans for developing the economies of large regions, considering global production fragmentation, the strategies of transnational corporations and complex forms of interaction between authorities of different countries and across various spatial levels [23].

The most comprehensive (multi-scalar) approach to geostrategy was proposed by the prominent French geographer, geopolitician, and publicist Yves Lacoste [24]. According to him, geostrategy focuses on the study of rivalries and antagonisms between hostile states and political forces operating abroad, whereas

geopolitics examines conflicts, social perceptions and political discourse within a state's population. Lacoste argued that developing geostrategy presupposes the existence of an adversary or military threat. It involves a set of calculations and analyses justifying a potential response to an external challenge or a plan to seize a specific territory, taking into account the forces and resources available to the state, their distribution across different spatial levels and the likely reactions of the hostile party and other states. Unlike other authors, Lacoste, first, did not distinguish between external and internal threats and, second, emphasised the necessity of geostrategic analysis at the global, regional and local levels. This concept naturally encompasses each state's informal lists of geostrategic territories or objects of varying scales: individual countries and entire regions (Central Asia for Russia, China and the EU; the Pacific region; the Arctic), as well as territories and waters traversed by international transport routes such as the Panama and Suez Canals, the Red Sea and others.

The specific historical and geopolitical characteristics of internal territories abroad are generally reflected not in state programmes, as is done in Russia, but mainly in differences in status — additional competences granted to regions or municipalities situated near borders, on islands, or in regions with distinct ethnic and religious communities. 'Asymmetric' federations, where constituent units have different powers, are a common occurrence. To illustrate, in Italy, the border regions and those with distinctive demographic characteristics — the Aosta Valley, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia — were granted autonomy (special status) long before relatively recent reforms broadened the authority of all regions. Special status is likewise accorded to France's 'overseas communities', situated on islands thousands of kilometres from the metropole, with New Caledonia remaining the largest of these territories until 2025. In India, in addition to the states, there are eight union territories governed directly by the federal government due to their specific geographic location, foreign policy considerations, and historical circumstances.

Features of geostrategic territories

The term 'geostrategic' is more than a mere combination of two roots; it represents a concept that generates new meanings. 'Strategic' signifies, first, the unquestionable *importance of a territory or settlement at the national level* and the presence of potential or real dangers and threats, and second, the need to develop a targeted policy to mitigate them.

Russia, a country marked by exceptional diversity of natural and economic conditions, has always included territories that receive particular attention from the state and are subject to special regimes during certain historical periods.

A characteristic example is the Cossack borderlands [25]. Remarkably, the term ‘geostrategic territory’ emerged in the years of a radical change in the country’s geopolitical position, following the reunification of Crimea with Russia, the start of the conflict in Donbas, and, later, the special military operation.

The goal of distinguishing geostrategic territories is to acknowledge the impact of external factors of national and regional security on Russian territories within SDS and regional strategies. The rejection of the globalist model of a liberal economy, Western sanctions, and the reduced dependence on external suppliers of goods and services imply a predominant reliance on domestic resources, import substitution, and reindustrialisation. Consequently, these factors highlight, *inter alia*, the particular importance of certain mineral deposits, regions and industrial centres, transport networks. A ‘pivot to the east’ has become an urgent necessity, increasing the strategic significance of the Far Eastern ports and Russian Railways’ Eastern Operating Domain. In this context, external circumstances serve not only as a source of existential threats but rather as a stimulus for state-led modernisation policies and a basic framework for regional development and the country’s social fabric.

While some time ago external circumstances were regarded as favourable for Russia, with cross-border contacts seen as an additional resource for the development of its border territories, today these factors have become sources of existential threats. The geostrategic dimension is understood as the *presence of potential or actual external threats to a region’s security and its heightened vulnerability to such challenges*, which in turn necessitates the development of targeted policies to eliminate or mitigate their effects. Thus, the introduction of the term ‘geostrategic territory’ in SDS implied, on the one hand, a link with geopolitics, and on the other, its recognition as an additional form of regional policy alongside advanced development territories, special economic zones and similar instruments [26].

The root ‘geo’ refers to the source of vulnerabilities, namely the territorial projection of relationships of various kinds — international, bilateral between states, macro-regional, interregional, core–periphery, transboundary, cultural–political, and other types of connections. In other words, following Lacoste’s arguments, it can be asserted that geostrategic position is a *position within a multidimensional, multi-scalar space of external and internal connections*, rather than merely a place on the map. For instance, at the beginning of the century, proximity to developed EU countries prompted the Kaliningrad region’s economy to rely on cooperation with these states in assembly manufacturing. The resulting products were intended for the Russian market. After 2014, the onset of the Ukraine crisis and particularly the special military operation, the advantages

of the territory's geopolitical position became deficiencies due to the extreme vulnerability of the overland connection to mainland Russia and anti-Russian sanctions imposed by Western states.

At the same time, the *intertwinement of external security challenges faced by regions with internal ones* has become even more apparent, particularly in overcoming underperformance and pronounced territorial disparities, improving the quality of life and ensuring the country's integrity. The global geopolitical agenda has made it untenable to permit the communicative isolation of geostrategic territories from other regions, along with high levels of poverty, migration outflows and population decline linked to ageing and increasing labour market imbalances. In turn, the shortage of skilled personnel has emerged as a major obstacle to restructuring an economy predominantly focused on extraction — primary processing and the export of natural resources. A vicious circle has taken shape: insufficient technological innovation limits the development of human capital, generates migration pressures that highlight depopulation challenges, slows economic renewal and exacerbates the lag of geostrategic territories.

However, neither the first nor the significantly updated second SDS specifically identifies which individual factors (criteria) determine the geostrategic significance of a territory. It can be assumed that these criteria include *peripheral location, remoteness and isolation from major communications* (as seen in the Kaliningrad region, Far Eastern and Arctic Russian regions), *lagging behind* other territories in socio-economic performance and dynamics, and the *implementation of state programmes and large-scale projects*. Nonetheless, unfavourable economic conditions, low household incomes and depopulation are also typical of regions not designated as geostrategic, while some territories identified as such are quite prosperous [27]. Preferential economic regimes are by no means exclusive to geostrategic territories, and state programmes and large-scale projects are implemented beyond these areas as well [28].

The geostrategic position is *volatile and historically specific*. Yet, it can remain unchanged for prolonged periods: for instance, Crimea has retained its strategic significance for the Black Sea area over several centuries. But most often, a geostrategic position changes depending on political and economic circumstances, and the dominant political discourse, in turn, transforms territorial relations. An example is the Russian—Ukrainian borderlands — an extensive area of contacts and mutual influence between two closely related cultures, where conditions for intensive cross-border interaction and cooperation were present [29; 30]. However, in just a few weeks in 2014, the borderlands between the two countries became a zone of sharp division and armed conflict. Thus, a shift in

position within the system of territorial relations decreases or increases the level of potential threats and dangers. Thus, a change in position within the system of territorial relations can either mitigate or amplify potential threats and risks.

In political discourse, geostrategic attributes are often ascribed not only to peripheral territories but also to central ones that play a key role in the economy and/or fulfil crucial symbolic functions, particularly capital cities. History abounds with examples where political events in capitals, with little impact on other regions, determined the fate of the state. The capture of a capital by an adversary during armed conflicts often led to the collapse of the political regime, loss of independence or disintegration of the country. For example, French politicians in the past were especially concerned about Paris's vulnerability, being relatively close to the country's borders and lacking natural protective barriers.

The concept of 'territory' implies the presence of more or less distinct boundaries. Regions and municipalities have legally established territorial boundaries defining the authority of regional governments. However, the 'geostrategic significance' of a Russian region depends not only, and sometimes not so much, on its geographical location, but also on the *geostrategic properties of individual settlements and the objects located within them*. Intra-regional differences in the geostrategic status of a territory are generally more pronounced than interregional ones. The functioning of 'discrete' (local) strategic objects depends on spatial relations at multiple scales — from local to national, and sometimes even supranational. These objects typically influence security provision or are associated with the location of mineral deposits and other facilities, communications, processes of redevelopment (modernisation), and spatial compression under the impact of new technologies [31].

It is no coincidence that in one of the early versions of SDS-2024, 'strategic settlements' were given special priority. These were intended to include closed cities, transport hubs and ports, settlements linked to key enterprises, defence facilities, border crossing points, and similar sites. However, their obvious heterogeneity, large number and frequent overlap with advanced development settlements selected according to other criteria led to the abandonment of this priority. The geostrategic significance of individual settlements and other 'discrete' objects can surpass that of the administrative centre, and their communicative properties may be at least equivalent, reflecting the strengthening of multidimensional network structures that reshape the two-dimensional (Cartesian) linear-nodal, hierarchical configuration of territorial connections [31, p. 33].

At the same time, broad or shared geostrategic properties are characteristic of vast territories that extend well beyond a single region and lack political-administrative agency or governing institutions — for example, the Arctic or the Far

East. These properties are determined by geographical location and accessibility, shared communications, the 'areal' distribution of spatially continuous strategic natural resources, and natural-climatic, socio-climatic and socio-cultural similarities [32]. In such cases, effective coordination of development across multiple sectors is required, extending far beyond the competencies of individual agencies and administrations, together with management practices that integrate traditional regional-hierarchical and network approaches. The scale of these tasks, linked to the fate of 'large spaces', is truly geostrategic in nature and dictated by the country's long-term interests.

Geostrategic territories and national security

The designation of objects and territories as geostrategic, and the establishment of their hierarchy according to their significance for the country, depends on the assessment of internal risks, foreign policy challenges and security threats originating from different regions of the world. Therefore, it has a discursive nature. In the study of public perceptions of security and threats, as part of a geopolitical world-view, critical geopolitics plays a significant role. Within this framework, a geopolitical world-view is determined not so much by actual circumstances as by enduring myths, symbols, stereotypes and evolving opinions, constructed by elites and propagated through the media and the socialisation of new generations.

The response to new risks and 'soft' threats arising from globalisation (international terrorism, pandemics, uncontrolled migration, etc.) has been a growing complexity in public perceptions of security. From now on, the state is not considered the only agent and object of security provision. The distinction between foreign and domestic policy has blurred, and security is differentiated between the state, its constituent parts, social groups, individuals and entire macro-regions.

For border regions, many of which are classified as geostrategic, the intensification of the dialectical tension between the need to ensure international communications — including the facilitation of international trade and the enhancement of relevant infrastructure — and the tightening of control over cross-border flows, with careful filtering, is particularly significant under conditions of 'security obsession' [33]. A comprehensive understanding of security is capable of justifying any emergency measures and hyper-centralisation of authority. Traditional notions of security, based on the leading role of the state in its provision and relying on the power of enforcement machinery, including military force, clash with postmodern understandings, grounded in desecuritisation — a discourse depriving current issues of the aura of existential threat to society.

In this context, openness, cross-border cooperation and the mutual influence of neighbouring cultures come to the fore, promoting the transformation of borderlands into engines of development, while the interaction between law enforcement and modern technologies becomes the primary means of countering 'soft threats'.

Thus, the interests of the state, which extensively employs restrictive measures and in various ways limits the mobility of people, capital and information, are directly or indirectly opposed to the interests of economic actors, borderlands residents and ordinary citizens. As a result, the state is perceived as an external hostile force, obstructing ontological security, understood as the predictability of the conditions governing human activity in border regions.

In practice, desecuritisation of the borderlands between Russia and its western neighbours was limited, and in some cases unfeasible. It depended largely on how the security dilemma was managed. The dilemma arises because measures taken to ensure security in some countries are perceived as potential threats in others, provoking acute conflicts and reciprocal responses. In borderlands, the interpretation of the state as an 'external' or even hostile actor can overlap with spontaneous processes of transboundary regionalisation, triggered by increased economic interaction, or with deliberate attempts by neighbouring states to restructure the space in question through generating challenges to regionalism. Certain areas begin to be perceived as cohesive territories, whose boundaries do not coincide with national borders [34; 35]. Competition for the loyalty of citizens between external and internal social and political actors produces interstate conflicts that are fundamentally incompatible with desecuritisation.

Therefore, the security and vulnerability of geostrategic territories depend not only on material factors, such as the state of the economy, but also on the identity of citizens, which is shaped in part by perceptions of their region's place in Russia, its prospects, its significance for the country, as well as the forces influencing global politics, national security threats, and relations with neighbouring states. The tension between local and national identities, the victimisation of the historical past, the politicisation of contemporary issues and shifts in value orientations can pose a real threat to the country's integrity. Thus, cultural anchors that foster cohesion and solidarity among people, reinforce their connection to the country and to their place of residence, are of critical importance, as is the cultivation of good-neighbourly relations with adjacent states.

According to the well-known statement by Ernest Renan, 'the existence of a nation is a daily plebiscite' or, in other words, a constant struggle by the state for the loyalty of its citizens, their awareness of belonging to a particular community, and the preservation and renewal of markers distinguishing 'us' from 'them'. The 'daily plebiscite' entails recognising the nature and sources of

threats that could undermine national (civic) identity, including mass migration, lagging development and quality of life, or deliberate actions by internal or external actors. A key condition for sustaining the stability of national identity is a resilient collective memory of the past and symbolic capital: iconography, material markers such as sites of commemoration, memorials, holidays, parades, and other rituals essential for forging a strong connection between past and future [36; 37].

Geostrategic territories include areas with a troubled historical legacy. Some of them became part of the Russian state relatively recently in historical terms. A special place in modern Russia is held by the new territories. Members of ethnic groups that constitute titular nations in neighbouring countries account for a substantial proportion of the population in both the new regions and some other geostrategic territories. Many geostrategic regions are located in borderlands, where residents display significant, and particularly transboundary, mobility, which may enhance their susceptibility to cultural and symbolic influences capable of shaping their value orientations and identity. Finally, geostrategic territories include the tightly connected republics of the North Caucasus with a diverse ethnic composition and significant conflict potential, including that arising from the contested historical memories of different ethnic groups, as well as from myths and stereotypes. These factors imply the need for a flexible combination of regional spatial development policies and measures to prevent potential negative trends in its cultural and spiritual life.

Conclusions

Let us summarise and attempt to define geostrategic territories. In Western countries, this term generally relates to a state's foreign policy and military activities, its assessment of external threats and vulnerabilities, its capacity to project influence beyond its borders and its pursuit of opportunities for dominance in its region or globally. Only a few studies do not distinguish between external and internal factors that determine the significance of particular territories for the state. However, it is no longer possible to separate the closely intertwined external and internal, material and immaterial factors that render a territory geostrategic from the interpretation of national and other forms of security.

In Russia, the term 'geostrategic' has only recently been applied more widely, following the development of two SDS, which designate territories of varying significance as geostrategic, forming the focus of an additional dimension of regional policy.

Like geographic location, the 'geostrategic' properties of a territory are historically variable and transient. They depend on the international situation,

technology, including military and transport innovations, socio-economic development and many other factors. Similarly to the related concept of security, they have a discursive nature. These properties are ‘asymmetrical’: a particular territory may be geostrategic for one country but an ‘ordinary’ region for another.

Several criteria determining a territory’s geostrategic importance are common across many countries:

- 1) isolated location relative to the main part of the country, translating into military and economic vulnerability;
- 2) convergence of external and internal challenges to sustainable development, and sometimes to the very existence of the territory within the state;
- 3) presence of military bases and/or defence enterprises;
- 4) presence of unique natural resources;
- 5) specific population composition and historical legacy;
- 6) frustration, cultural marginalisation, and the population’s perception of being ‘neglected’ by the state, often combined with assertive strategies of influential external actors in the realm of symbolic politics;
- 7) high dependence of the territory on national social and cultural-symbolic policies and investments, regardless of their direct or indirect profitability, for example, to engage the principle of effective occupation, which confers the right to territorial recognition, to strengthen local support, or to improve communications with hard-to-reach regions;
- 8) nationwide symbolic significance of the territory as a whole, including its settlements and sites of commemoration, their importance for national identity and heightened public attention and sensitivity to events and the fate of the region, with Crimea being a prime example.

Evidently, a few criteria suffice to classify a region as geostrategic. However, providing an exhaustive list of such criteria is hardly possible.

The root ‘geo-’ signifies the variability of the position of geostrategic territories and their place within a system of diverse relations at multiple levels — international, bilateral between states, macro-regional, interregional, core-periphery, cross-border, politico-cultural, and other connections. Moreover, it indicates the source of vulnerabilities arising from some of these relations. The volatility of many types of economic and political relations amid the current geopolitical turbulence heightens the mobilisation of resources and efforts to adapt to ongoing changes and underscores the need for state ‘oversight’ of geostrategic territories. A representative example is the municipalities of Russia’s western borderlands, which were affected by sanctions imposed by neighbouring EU states or hostilities after the beginning of the special military operation.

Changes in the position of municipalities and settlements within the network of relations and flows — including international trade, transport, tourism, and other spheres — reshape their hierarchy and role within network structures. Priority is given to those linked to major economic projects, production–distribution networks of large companies or heightened military risks. Intra-regional differences are generally much more pronounced than interregional ones, and insufficient attention to them represents a clear gap in the SDS [38].

Based on the properties and criteria described, geostrategic territories can be defined as areas highly dependent on state regional policy and experiencing the combined impact of acute external and internal, material and immaterial challenges to security and sustainable development.

The application of any spatial development policy instrument requires a rigorous justification of priorities, which has a direct bearing on geostrategic territories. Although the number of such territories was slightly reduced in the second SDS, the problem persists: given the scale of the tasks, it is hard to envisage ever developing a programme of uniform support for all 29 Russian regions classified as geostrategic. The geostrategic territories mentioned in SDS-2024 are extremely heterogeneous: they include the largest republic of the North Caucasus, Dagestan, the Arctic Murmansk region and municipalities along the western border of the country. This necessitates a careful calibration of planned measures based on detailed knowledge of the territory and an analysis of the opportunities, pathways and constraints of their development under conditions of foreign-policy pressure, economic containment and rising internal tensions.

Funding. *This research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (grant №25-17-00277) within the international project “Geostrategic territories of Russia: external and internal challenges”. Research for the section “Geostrategic Territories and National Security” was supported by the State Assignment of the Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences (№ 124032900015-3, FMWS-2024-0008).*

References

1. Kuznetsova, O. V. 2019, Problems of Elaboration of Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation, *Spatial Economics*, №4, p. 107–125, doi: 10.14530/se.2019.4.107-125
2. Leksin, V. N. 2019, The roads that we do not choose (On the Government “Strategy of spatial development of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025”), *Russian Economic Journal*, №3, p. 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.33983/0130-9757-2019-3-3-3-243>
3. Mikheeva, N. N. 2018, Strategy of spatial development: new stage or repetition of old mistakes?, *EKO = ECO*, №5, p. 158–178, <https://doi.org/10.30680/ECO0131-7652-2018-5-158-178>

4. Zubarevich, N. V. 2019, Spatial development strategy: priorities and instruments, *Voprosy Ekonomiki*, № 1. p. 135—145, <https://doi.org/10.32609/0042-8736-2019-1-135-145>
5. Domnina, I. N. 2020, “Geostrategic territory” as a form of spatial regulation of the economy, *Vestnik Instituta Ekonomiki Rossiyskoy Akademii Nauk (The Bulletin of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences)*, № 6, p. 126—141, <https://doi.org/10.24411/2073-6487-2020-10074>
6. Ivanov, O. B., Buchwald, E. M. 2019, “Geo-strategic territories” and “points of growth” in the strategy of spatial development of the Russian Federation, *ETAP: Economic Theory, Analysis, and Practice*, № 4, p. 7—23, <https://doi.org/10.24411/2071-6435-2019-10098>
7. Boulanger, P. 2023, *Introduction à la géostratégie*, Paris, La Découverte, 127 p.
8. Haushofer, K. 1934, *Weltpolitik von heute*, Berlin, Zeitgeschichte, 269 p.
9. Vigarié, A. 1989, *Géostratégie des océans*, Caen, Paradigme, 399 p.
10. Rosière, S. 2001, Géographie politique, géopolitique et géostratégie: distinctions opératoires, *L'information géographique*, vol. 65, № 1, p. 33—42.
11. Sloan, G. 2017, *Geopolitics, geography and strategic history. Geopolitical Theory*, Abingdon, Routledge, 272 p.
12. *Britannica Book of the Year 1957: A Record of the March of Events of 1956, 1957*, Chicago, Encyclopædia Britannica, 863 p.
13. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 1961, Gove, P. (ed.), Unabridged, Springfield, Merriam-Webster, 2718 p.
14. Brzezinski, Z. 1986, *Game Plan: Geostrategic Structure of the Struggle between the USA and the USSR*, Moscow, Progress, 243 p. (in Russ.).
15. Kissinger, H. 2015, *World order*, New York, 432 p.
16. Couteau-Bégarié, H. 1999, *Traité de stratégie*, Paris, Economica, 1005 p.
17. Nye, J. 2005, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 191 p.
18. Venier, P. 2010, Main Theoretical Currents in Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century, *L'Espace politique*, vol. 12, № 3, <https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.1714>
19. Sorokin, K. E. 1996, *Geopolitics of Modernity and Geostrategy of Russia*, Moscow, Russian Political Encyclopedia, 167 p. (in Russ.).
20. Sloan, G. 2017, *Geopolitics, geography and strategic history. Geopolitical Theory*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, p. 272.
21. Dolman, E. 2000, Geography in the Space Age: An Astropolitical Analysis, in: Sloan, G. 2017, *Geopolitics, geography and strategic history. Geopolitical Theory*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, p. 83—107.
22. Tuathail, J. 2000, Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Security, in: Sloan, G. 2017, *Geopolitics, geography and strategic history. Geopolitical Theory*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, p. 107—125.

23. Falcão Vieira, E., Milano Falcão Vieira, M. 2008, Geostrategy of economic spaces: Innovation and Change in Latin America Territorial Administration, *Journal of Technology Management and Innovation*, vol. 3, №3, p. 142—150, <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-27242008000100014>

24. Lacoste, Y. 1991, Géopolitique et géostratégie, *Stratégique*, vol 2, № 50.

25. Leksin, V.N. 2025, The public policy of “population retention” in particularly significant territories, *Region: Economics and Sociology*, № 3 (127), p. 3—25, <https://doi.org/10.15372/REG20250301>

26. Domnina, I.N. 2020, “Geostrategic territory” as a form of spatial regulation of the economy, *Vestnik Instituta Ekonomiki Rossiyskoy Akademii Nauk (The Bulletin of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences)*, №6, p. 126—141, <https://doi.org/10.24411/2073-6487-2020-10074>

27. Mikheeva, N.N. 2025, Priority geostrategic regions of spatial development strategies for Russia, *EKO=ECO*, № 3, p. 40—55, <https://doi.org/10.30680/ECO0131-7652-2025-3-40-55>

28. Buchwald, E.M., Valentik, O.N. 2024, Spatial development strategy: stage of radical renewal, *Regional Economy. South of Russia*, vol. 12, № 1, p. 4—14, <https://doi.org/10.15688/re.volsu.2024.1.1>

29. Kolosov, V.A., Vendina, O.I., Zotova, M.V., Savchuk, I.G., Gritsenko, A.A., Krylov, M.P., Zhurzhenko, T. Yu., Herzen, A.A. 2011, *Russian-Ukrainian borderland: twenty years of separated unity*, Moscow, 352 p., EDN: SUOSZJ

30. Anisimov, A.M., Glinkina, S.P., Vardomsky, L.B., Kolosov, V.A., Barinov, S.L., Vertinskaya, T.S., Gertsen, A.A., Golovina, E.D., Gritsenko, A.A., Evchenko, N.N., Zotova, M.V., Kiryuhin, A.M., Libman, A.M., Lobanov, M.M., Pylin, A.G., Sebentsov, A.B., Turaeva, M.O., Ushkalova, D.I., Chasovsky, V.I. 2013, *Trans-border cooperation in the regions of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine*, St. Petersburg, Eurasian Development Bank, 100 p. (in Russ.), EDN: UBDBVN

31. Pilyasov, A.N. 2025, The space we lost (on the new strategy for spatial development of Russia-2036), *EKO=ECO*, № 3, p. 7—39, <https://doi.org/10.30680/ECO0131-7652-2025-3-7-39>

32. Pilyasov, A.N. 2024, Composition of Arctic territories for state support: which way to choose?, *Arctic and North*, № 56, p. 92—111, <https://doi.org/10.37482/issn2221-2698.2024.56.92>

33. Golunov, S. 2012, *EU-Russian border security: Challenges, (mis)perceptions, and responses*, EU Russian Border Security Challenges Misperceptions and Responses, 208 p., <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203106969>

34. Panov, P.V. 2020, Multifaced regionalism, *Bulletin of Perm University. Political Science*, vol. 14, № 1, p. 102—115, <https://doi.org/10.17072/2218-1067-2020-1-102-115>

35. Scott, J.W. 2009, Bordering and Ordering the European Neighbourhood: A Critical Perspective on EU Territoriality and Geopolitics, *Trames. Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 13, № 3, p. 232—247, <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2009.3.03>

36. Malinova, O. Yu. 2015, *The Actual Past: Symbolic Politics of the Ruling Elite and the Dilemmas of Russian Identity*, Series: Russia. In Search of Oneself, Moscow, 207 p. (in Russ.).

37. Sevastianova, Y., Efremenko, D. 2020, Securitization of memory and dilemma of mnemonic security, *Political Science (RU)*, № 2, p. 66—86, <https://doi.org/10.31249/poln/2020.02.03>

38. Druzhinin, A. G., Kolosov, V. A. 2025, Spatial Development Strategy for Russia Up to 2030: Innovations and Tasks for Solution, *Studies on Russian Economic Development*, vol. 36, № 4, p. 466—473, <https://doi.org/10.1134/s1075700725700194>

The authors

Prof. **Vladimir A. Kolosov**, Head of the Geopolitical Research Laboratory, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2817-9463>

E-mail: kolosov@igras.ru

Dr **Olga I. Vendina**, Leading Research Fellow, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3650-1299>

E-mail: o.vendina@gmail.com

Dr **Anton A. Gritsenko**, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9335-4761>

E-mail: antgritsenko@igras.ru

Dr **Mariya V. Zotova**, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9162-4932>

E-mail: zotova@igras.ru

Mikhail S. Karpenko, Research Fellow, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5262-944X>

E-mail: mike.ck@yandex.ru

Dr **Aleksandr B. Sebentsov**, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9665-5666>

E-mail: asebentsov@igras.ru

Nikita L. Turov, Research Fellow, Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0000-0001-7611-4985>

E-mail: turov@igras.ru



Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution – Noncommercial – No Derivative Works <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.en> (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)