

NEW INTERNATIONAL REALITY AND RUSSIA'S STRATEGY

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Abstract

The transition to a new phase of global transformation, which we are witnessing against the background of the Ukrainian crisis, requires an understanding of the origins and outcomes of previous events. This analysis also makes it possible to make forecasts of the further development of the situation. The article analyzes the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, which, on the one hand, exposed fundamental contradictions between Russia and the West, and on the other, has a complex internal structure connected with the very essence of Russian-Ukrainian relations. The role of sanctions, the main tool of the West to remove Russia from the «first league» of world politics, is indicated. The circle of participants in the conflict is indicated, which includes several categories of players with different political goals at once. In conclusion, the nature of their actions is noted and a forecast is made for the further evolution of their strategies.

Keywords

Ukrainian crisis, European security, economic sanctions.

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ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT

The Ukrainian crisis escalated more than nine months ago. This period has been marked by intensification of hostilities, attempts of the parties to come to an understanding through diplomacy and, finally, stabilization of the front line. At the global level, there was a severe energy crisis in Europe, a crisis of the legitimacy of the former political order in many European countries, as well as a restructuring of the entire international — both political and economic — reality.

The current situation is often referred to as the return of the Cold War. However, along with similarities, the irreconcilable confrontation of the two sides in various areas, there are also significant differences. The main one is that during the Cold War era, the sides were acutely conscious of the cost of a direct face-off and risks of unintentional escalation. With the tragic experience of the Second World War in mind, the state leaders could see that no outcome of an armed conflict between the superpowers would justify the losses, and any victory would be Pyrrhic.

The collapse of the bipolar system was followed by a 'counter-revolution of values' of military and political restraint. For the sake of flamboyant public gestures, states demonstrate strategic irresponsibility and frivolity in behavior, taking liberties with diplomatic, political, and military provocations. A catastrophic lack of rules of interaction that accompanied the confrontation during the Cold War was clearly manifested. In this sense, the crises of the post-bipolar era are more dangerous, unpredictable, and difficult to manage.

Throughout the past three decades, relations between Russia and the West have been built on the basic assumption that Moscow would accept any NATO move to change the balance of power in Europe. Indeed, Russia often had to make concessions, which gradually worsened its strategic positions not only on the continent, but even along its immediate borders. By means of negotiations, the Russian leadership hoped to convey to the United States the idea that it should not rely on one-sided domination and offered alternatives to the US-centric security structure.

However, from the 1990s on, the United States has rejected Russian proposals to shift responsibility for European security from NATO to the OSCE, create a joint missile defense architecture, and sign the European Security Treaty. An analysis of the memoirs of Western leaders shows that the West (and above all the United States) refused to understand the Russian interests. For example, Bill Clinton is sincerely convinced that if Russia followed the 'right' path toward democracy, NATO enlargement

would not be a threat to it.

As a response, Russia made several démarches, however, a low level of implementation of threats remained a key problem of its foreign policy. Russia's ideas and proposals were ignored and not taken seriously. This led our diplomacy to the conclusion that it was necessary to shift the center of gravity of discussions with Western partners to other issues.

The turning point was the transition of the West to the course for Ukraine to join NATO with several Ukrainian governments that for many years built their national project on opposing Russia. Some experts draw parallels between the Moscow—Kyiv relations and the situation between the US and Cuba. Cuba, on the one hand, strove to be at the forefront of the struggle against world capitalism, and on the other, it remained closely integrated into the American social and political life. However, despite certain similarities, such a comparison is not entirely correct: unlike Cuba, Ukraine started intensive militarization, turning into a significant military player in Eastern Europe. Apart from that, Ukraine has an unresolved social and cultural conflict between people with a pro-Russian identity and those who associate their worldview with the Western Ukrainian national purpose. With such contradictions, the Russian-Ukrainian relations can be compared rather with those between India and Pakistan: both countries emerged at the same time when the British Raj collapsed. For Pakistan, the origins of nation-building are directly related to opposing India. Both countries in parallel formed significant armed forces, including nuclear weapons. In its foreign policy, Pakistan began establishing relations with states hostile to India in an attempt to balance the threat from Delhi.

Moscow perceived Ukraine as a country of a similar antagonistic type, realizing that in a few years it could receive a significant amount of weapons from NATO countries, which would be enough to deal damage either to the Donbass or to Russia itself. As a result of growing differences and an outright refusal of the West to seek a peaceful resolution, the conflict entered into an armed phase.

INCEPTION OF GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION

To date, the first phase of the global transformation is already over, therefore there is a need to analyze and comprehend its origins and results.

First, one of the main intermediate outcomes of the conflict is the rupture of the asymmetric economic interdependence between Russia and Europe. The explosion of the Nord Stream gas pipelines has become a symbolic end to the era of mutually beneficial growth of economic well-being. Since February, Russia and the West have been in a state of economic war. The avalanche of sanctions imposed on Russia by Western countries was aimed at inflicting sudden, rapid, and devastating damage to the Russian economy, which would force Moscow to reconsider its

foreign policy priorities.

Paradoxically, the West is well aware that in the current political and economic conditions, the sanctions pressure on a state to change its political course is doomed to failure. This is confirmed by the cases of Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea and, for example, Iran. Paying sometimes a high price for their sovereign existence, these countries retain the ability to take initiative in foreign policy. For Iran, it is about balancing threats and struggling for regional leadership; for North Korea, dictating its own 'rules of the game' on the Korean Peninsula. For Cuba, it is about expanding its influence on the integration-seeking groups of Latin American countries. In turn, Russia has maintained its economic and financial stability and is actively implementing strategies to circumvent sanctions and counter their negative effects. The West made a strategic blunder: in the new international reality, there will be a far more polycentric system, and the process of de-dollarization of the world economy will inevitably start. The economic mistake is that due to the move away from Russian energy supplies, the welfare growth of ordinary European citizens, which has been the case for the past thirty years, has stopped. Ordinary people start blaming their own governments for the situation, and Europe is facing political consequences of its own decisions. Second, the intermediate outcomes of the conflict have confirmed that the Ukrainian crisis is one of the most multicomponent political crises of last two centuries.

It is exacerbated by internal factors that lie in an unresolved civil confrontation of people with opposite identities. Their irreconcilable dispute develops around the orientation of the Ukrainian nation siding either with the East or the West.

As for external factors, there are at least six parties to the conflict. The crisis participants include the following groups with different political goals and strategies: the United States as a separate actor, the countries of the 'New Europe' (Britain, Poland, the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia), the countries of Western Europe (Italy, France, Germany), the union of Russia and Belarus, a group of Western nations we are referred to as 'airlock countries' (Turkey and Hungary), as well as Ukraine itself. Each group has its own strategy.

The United States intended to provoke Russia to use force, so that Moscow, having exhausted its resources, would leave the 'premiere league' of world politics, and the European Union, having lost inexpensive resource supplies, would lose its strategic autonomy. After the first six months of the conflict, the United States made sure the Ukrainian government could stay in power and consolidated control over key European capitals. However, despite their efforts, Moscow continues active military operations with relatively few resources and maintains the initiative in the developing crisis.

The countries of the 'New Europe' hoped to permanently ban Russia from participating in European affairs, to ensure a reliable presence of

the United States in Eastern Europe, and to keep in check any attempts of Western Europe to act autonomously. By and large, the 'New Europe' has managed to achieve these goals. However, as a result, it has faced severe economic, social, and migration crises.

The crisis hit Western Europe by surprise, as it had lost the habit of thinking independently. Having taken a 'vacation from strategic thinking', the EU moved on to a 'strategy of sentimentality': high-flown statements, complacent summits, ostensibly cordial handshakes not backed up by goal-setting, resources, or determination to make sacrifices. As a result, the countries of Western Europe delegated their foreign policy goal-setting to the United States, the countries of 'New Europe', and Great Britain. The successes of Western Europe at this stage of the conflict are not obvious: Europe has faced unprecedented economic and energy crises, as well as risks of political destabilization, and has lost its foreign policy initiative.

The 'airlock countries' used a strategy of opportunism and strategic autonomy, seeking the maximum political and economic benefits. Their policy proved to be relatively successful. They have increased their autonomy from Washington and Brussels and position themselves as a platform for diplomatic negotiations after the conflict. However, this comes at a cost of increased pressure from the allies.

Ukraine sought to ensure the survival of the Western Ukrainian political project at any cost. Acting at the same time as an active participant in the crisis and a battlefield between Russia and Western countries, Ukraine was able to ensure the survival of the government of Volodymyr Zelensky, consolidate his control over the country's life and push the opposition out of politics. Externally, Ukraine has ensured a systematic provision of international assistance. But Ukraine's losses are more significant: collapsing economy, the loss of a significant part of its territory and population, as well as inability to conduct military operations relying on its own forces.

Finally, Russia set a goal to eliminate the military foothold in Ukraine, force the West to negotiate a new security architecture in Europe, break the asymmetric economic interdependence with the West, and, finally, consolidate the 'world majority' on the basis of the fight against the Western neocolonialism. Over the past six months, Russia has eliminated a significant part of Ukraine's military resources, the means of their reproduction, gained new territories, and secured a strategically important land corridor to Crimea. Moscow was successful in consolidating the part of the international community that did not join the West. The failures include the lack of a decisive victory in the conflict and its prolongation. Apart from that, there is no new platform for building economic relations with Europe.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Today we are witnessing the transition to the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis in a new emerging international reality. The countries of Western Europe have lost their strategic autonomy, the initiative was taken over by the 'emerging democracies' of the former Eastern Bloc, and the 'world majority' consolidated to oppose the West. In such conditions, Russia's determination to achieve a victory remains significant. The success of the 'airlock countries' (Turkey and Hungary) is another sign of the new emerging reality. They understand Russia's position, maintain strategic autonomy, seeking to expand their influence in Europe and playing the role of a platform for negotiations.

At the same time, the Western support for Ukraine is still strong, therefore the military and political confrontation between Russia and the West is very likely to continue in 2023, and the conflict itself will become a 'competition of will' between Russia and Europe. The Russian side demonstrates a determination to achieve its goals, and there are no doubts either about the Ukrainian course towards waging war, despite the large number of casualties and the growing tension in its society. At the same time, both sides consider time to be a resource to their advantage.

Thus, Russia expects that in the long term Ukraine will cease to be the number one priority in Western foreign policy. The Europeans can be persuaded to negotiate in the event of a catastrophic nature: a complete collapse of the Ukrainian front amid the inability to continue to supply weapons, a man-made disaster at energy or nuclear facilities, major sabotage of energy pipelines that will put into question the energy security of Europe.

A similar course dominates in Ukraine as well. Politicians supporting the peace process have been killed or forced out of Ukrainian politics. President Zelensky is fully committed to 'the Warring Ukraine' project and today personifies the party of war. However, being the president of war and the president of peace are completely different modalities, switching between which quite often is impossible. For example, the massive outflow of people from Ukraine and issuing Russian passports to many of them pose high risks for Zelensky in the long run. And when there is peace, it will be necessary to explain to the Ukrainian people the reason why a significant part of their compatriots preferred Russian citizenship. It's highly probable that Zelensky will want to keep this military and political configuration: as the president of war, if he retains power, he will choose the path of leading the country in any of its territorial forms with well-equipped armed forces with Western-supplied weapons, that is, he will follow the path of Israel.

What may Russia's strategy depend on? On the correct matching of available resources with its strategic goals and on keeping the initiative.

Having lost the initiative, indifferent countries pay the highest price — a new political reality will be finally shaped at their expense.

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