

GREAT EURASIAN POWER IN THE WHIRLWIND OF CHANGE: RUSSIA'S MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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The article addresses the issue of historical context of the Russian foreign policy and its practical implications. The author points out that the current political developments within the international system cannot be understood properly without assessing the historical trajectory of the Russian identity. The article is divided into three parts that demonstrate the importance of the contextual approach to the Russian foreign policy. The first part deals with the changes in international power balance and the need to conceptualize the new normal without suppressing opposing narratives. The second part assesses the practical consideration of such a conceptualization with the aim of mitigating the current tensions between the Russian Federation and the Western states. The third part presents an overview of the Russian approach towards long-term international stability, distributional international justice and mutual respect.

The author concludes that profound change in the international system did not bring considerable alteration in the Russian strategic culture and strategic vision. The article also reassesses the widespread idea of colonialism as the core elements of the Russian strategic thinking. The historical context of the Russian foreign policy proves the opposite view that the vision of self in Russia is much more about bridging the gaps and facilitating mutual dialog. Moreover, the author believes that the main reason for that approach is the relatively stable international position of Russia (in terms of centuries, rather than decades).

Key words: foreign policy, historical mission, Russia, mutual dialog.

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The world does not stand still. It may prove to be notoriously difficult even for most international experts and analysts, let alone ordinary people, to fully comprehend current developments. Nowadays we do not always have enough time to rise to international challenges posed by controversial trends and yet-to-be-seen implications. Despite new remarkable traffic speeds, much faster information flows and an accelerated pace in technological development compared to twenty years ago, the world – paradoxical as it may seem – is increasingly characterized by unresolved, if not fundamentally unsolvable, global problems, be it in the Middle East, the Korean Peninsula, the Afghan-Pakistani region or Ukraine. World politics appears to be embracing a new *modus vivendi*, which implies living next to a ticking time bomb.

This may have come as a counter-reaction to the West's ill-fated strategies and misadventures in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, which seriously destabilized European and global politics. With TNC's selfish interests unquestionably prevailing over longer-term interests of the rest of mankind, high levels of political tolerance to real and potential threats may serve as an instrument of preserving «short-term», or «immediate», stability. Hence, there is no consensus on how to approach such global issues as terrorism and migration, which is compounded by the lack of political will and – let's be honest – of *some basic professional skills*. Much needed solutions do not materialize, and legal documents are not properly drafted or executed with previously adopted international norms and regulations inevitably becoming old dinosaurs. At the same time, the international legal fabric designed to address current and future problems is merely riddled with legal gaps and vacuums. All this gives rise to a sad phenomenon yet to be grasped, namely the decline of international norms and a partial comeback of the rule of force in world politics. International elites' slow response to negative trends and challenges coupled with the inexorable degradation of norms appear as an iconic recent trend.

The post-1991 profound changes, in one way or another, impacted most countries and regions and exerted an influence on virtually every aspect of global relations at large. Paradoxically, unlike many earlier periods, the current historical context has yet to be profoundly conceptualized [5]. This may be the next stage in the ebb-and-flow pattern following intense foreign policy debates in the 1990s and the early 2000s. As early as the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, most of these «grand narratives», however, had proved to be operationally inadequate and prone to becoming methodologically obsolete at a breakneck speed. It may be premature to give an overall – positive or negative – assessment of today's developments, as their outcomes may not become perceptible until sometime in the remote future. Nonetheless, it is becoming obvious in the second decade of the 2000s, that the 70-year long period, comprising the 1940s – 1980s Cold War phase and the post-communist transition phase, has ended [8; 13]. The world is on the threshold of embracing a new paradigm. The general characteristics of this paradigm are already apparent today.

Despite all the controversy surrounding current patterns of social development, one can notice a more or less clear trend. *Cultural and civilizational differences* increas-

ingly add up to traditionally uneven socioeconomic development at the national and regional level. They have always existed, but they were largely suppressed or sidelined on a regular basis amid a bitter bipolar confrontation. Now we are increasingly aware of the fact that the world system comprises not only different economic and political regimes but also *various cultures, civilizations, values, and ideologies*. Far from being peaceful, at times, the coexistence of cultures, unfortunately, appears to be evolving in line with the rather gloomy forecasts of Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama about «the clash of civilizations» and «immense wars of the spirit» respectively. It allows a sufficient degree of objectivity while determining a sort of cumulative effect in world politics. The endless «rich vs. poor» war, pitting «the golden billion» against «the rest», has started to be complemented by the confrontation along cultural fault lines, with material factors receding into the background.

The history of international relations, especially in the 20th century, is replete with examples of how incompatible values and clashing ideologies provoked political disputes often degenerating into armed conflicts or wars. Actually, fundamentally incompatible ideologies, opposing values and rival social systems could, in essence, be blamed for triggering violence in the form of the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War characterized by numerous local conflicts in the bipolar world's periphery. Therefore, the stronger and closer the interdependence between various traditional and nascent modernist societies in the shrinking world, the more dangerous the emerging world order will obviously be. Unsettled regional crises and conflicts; vast territories affected by poverty and backwardness; unavoidable costs of globalization and modernization; mass migration; rising extremism; nuclear proliferation; yet-to-be-seen and potentially dangerous consequences of scientific and technological progress and others – all of these phenomena need to be looked at not only through conventional socioeconomic lenses, but also through the prism of *different civilizational and cultural factors* always determining the development of various countries and regions.

The need to contextual approach to Russian policy

History is *continuous*; it has no definitive starting point and no end. Thus, examining a set of separate pieces of evidence and isolated facts, which, by the way, typifies the *Western*, rather than Asian, *way of thinking*, tends to foil any attempts to comprehend history. Specifically, using this approach, we are bound to get a distorted picture of what is going on. Any more or less objective evaluation of the current situation should rely on basic knowledge about the world, one's country, its past or present. As of now, the task of forming socio-economic and historical background, which would fully reflect the richness of historical and cultural experience of states and nations, lies behind us. This is fully relevant to studying Russia's rich history.

Few can question the impact of Russia's developments on the entire history of the 20th century and on virtually all countries and peoples on Earth, even the most remote ones. In a similar way, few, except a handful of irresponsible opportunists, will take the

liberty of dismissing the role and significance of Russia in the modern world, its influence on regional conflict-resolution and on the global balance of power, and its contribution to international peace and security [12]. However, one should admit that even Russians – given some public debates – sometimes have a rather rudimentary knowledge of history and of the country's civilizational identity – not to mention foreigners! Quite a lot of them have a rather vague idea of the centuries-long history of the great Eurasian power amid the wave of wholesale historic transformations.

Pluralism and diversity, which are a driving force of steady socioeconomic progress, cannot alone help us to acquire a full understanding of ourselves and the world around us. People are largely unaware of how the modern international system, marrying both global and purely *national* trends, functions. In some states globalism and nationalism coexist *for centuries* without merging or forming a coherent and cohesive whole, thus provoking occasional crises and wars [4]. This is exemplified by Russia entering the First World War. All this exerts a profound influence on the international standing of relevant countries, their international behavior and, thereby, the global system at large. That is the reason why we feel a compelling need for *an inclusive intelligent dialogue or a really candid and friendly exchange of perspectives on a global scale*. Apart from being politically unbiased, it should be based on comparing rather than contrasting values.

Understanding the position of the other is essential to any constructive dialogue. Unlike in the late 20th century and the early 21st century, the apparently forgotten notion of *state sovereignty* seems to be re-emerging and gaining momentum, with nation-specific development prioritized over global formats. The image of globalization as the triumph of the liberal democratic world order gravitating towards the global free trade system has lost its lustre and faded as a result of the recent developments on the world stage. The scenario of continuous and endless integration – «the integration of integrations» – has gradually evolved into a good cause, which, if prematurely implemented, can be toxic and fraught with potential danger [2, p. 41]. It begs the question which great power – Russia, the United States or China – would subordinate its vital security interests to the UN or the its allies. It also invites another obvious question – which of the mentioned states would refrain from using military force to ensure security if all other mechanisms and tools proved inefficient?

However, history shows that such seemingly easy questions may become awkward, tricky, and difficult to answer when the situation is complicated by opportunistic decisions, historical, and cultural factors.

Historical roots of foreign policy vision

Should one look at the map of Russia through eyes of an ordinary Westerner with little knowledge of Russian history, it would be clear why the anti-Russian propaganda spread by some Western media and analysts may sometimes bear fruit. Even following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the largest state in the world straddling two continents and spanning eleven time-zones, has been «hanging» over the «defenceless» Europe

like a giant glacier, allegedly imperilling its security and prosperity. The very size and geographical location of our country makes it the most convenient target to portray as an imminent threat to Western civilization. It has been used as a tool to secure Westerners' consent to ever-growing military expenses, American boots on the European ground, the eastward expansion of NATO, the deployment of the US missile defence system in Eastern Europe, the agreement to the policy of sanctions, etc. In this sense, it should be recognized that debunking plentiful historical myths about our country is a challenging task, because «the one who wants to believe will believe». However, it is worth listening to the opinion of some renowned Western historians to start remoulding this undoubtedly superficial opinion.

In order to understand Russia's history and foreign policy we should consider some of the basic *security concerns* of a country, which lies on a vast continental plain and has few natural borders. George Kennan's famous Long Telegram mentioned Russia's strong concern about state security. Today such prominent British historians as Robert Massie, Philip Longworth, and Peter Hopkirk point out the same thing. It was neither the voracious appetite for foreign «goods» nor the grand design to proselytize the indigenous population whatever it costs, which forced Russians to explore the vast Siberian territories and «open» the exits to the Baltic and Black Seas, as well as to the Pacific Ocean, or to expand its borders in Central Asia. It was the vital interest to ensure the nation's survival. For good reason, Longworth prefers the word «development» to «colonization» to describe Russian policy stressing that «the Russians did not have the feeling of national superiority or racial prejudice». It is revealing that this British author believes that the current tensions between Russia and the West are rooted in the attempts of the latter to apply its «a priori theories» to «the country and people incomprehensible to the West» [9, p. 135, 322].

Peter Hopkirk belongs to Western historians who refrains from making a priori assumptions and judgments. He came up with the idea of the «Great Game»¹. «After all, it was no more than the other European powers were doing [...] Just as the Baltic was Russia's Achilles' heel in the event of trouble with Britain, it had long been obvious that the latter's most vulnerable point was India. Therefore, to have bases in Central Asia from which its frontiers could be threatened greatly increased Russia's bargaining power» [7, p. 32]. Let us give a frank answer to the question. Could the policy of a great Eurasian power in the age of «classical imperialism» have been anything but *imperialistic*? It may have been. However, in this case the fate of once-mighty empires of the East, including India, China, Persia, which were torn apart by the West, would undoubtedly have awaited Russia, a multinational and multi-confessional country possessing the richest natural resources. Russia would not have made its substantial contribution to world cultural and scientific heritage of the 19th and 20th centuries. And, most importantly, a powerful consistent advocate of peace – consider the Hague Conventions,

¹ The way the famous British historian interpreted the well-known Anglo-Russian confrontation in Asia suggests that the «Great Game» evolved into the Cold War in the 20th century, then into the Perestroika, followed by the Russian reset (aka «overload») and the current contradictions between Russia and Anglo-America.

peace conferences of 1899 and 1907 - would have disappeared. Moreover, it maintained the balance of power in Europe until the outbreak of the First World War...

Nowadays, just like in the times of Churchill's notorious Iron Curtain Speech, many Western leaders demonstrate an astonishing lack of strategic *empathy*, an ability to grasp the position of Russia and its security concerns. Back then, instead of post-war cooperation with the Soviet Union, the West triggered a Cold War, as it tried to rely on its a priori assumptions. Curiously, being a far-sighted politician, Churchill apparently realized that he had gone to extremes and tried to mitigate the effect. At the closed briefings for journalists, he stressed that the speech was not in any way aimed at challenging or being hostile to the Soviet people. A few years later, being re-elected prime minister, he vainly tried to promote the idea of a new summit by writing in a message to the Soviet leadership on July 4th, 1954, that his only goal would be «to find a reasonable way to live side by side in an atmosphere of increasing confidence, detente and prosperity». Unfortunately, it took the two sides grave crises and violent conflicts to realize that they had reached a deadlock in the Cold War and needed a *détente* [11]. It was sheer luck rather than mutual restraint, which prevented a disaster.

The absence of dialogue and of attempts to understand each other engender an appealing, even if false, «simplicity» and, unfortunately, persistent stereotypes. After all, even the famous Brezhnev Doctrine is a construct comprising quotations, misunderstandings, and conjectures. In any case, it cannot in any way be viewed as revealing the essence or the trajectory of the Soviet foreign policy. If we approve of Berdyaev's idea of Russia as a messianic country, then remembering the 70-year history of the USSR, we will probably have to side with another Russian «prophet», Petr Chaadaev, who believed that Russia was destined «to teach the world some great lesson» [3, p. 32]. Recalling the sad fate of the Union, one could ask if it is a lesson not to learn. However, no, this is not quite the case! The modern world inherited the institutional system set up during the Cold War and created by the mighty Soviet Union. It is a system, which allows maintaining peace amid escalating international situation. It is this institutional potential inherited by Russia from the former USSR, in particular, its permanent membership on the UN Security Council that protected it from a back seat in world politics. Such a decline would have been fraught with irreparable consequences.

The international security regime is hard to imagine without Russia. The potential withdrawal of our country would render the multilateral agreements on weapons of mass destruction null and void and would undermine the treaty system countering WMD proliferation. The global anti-terror campaign would misfire, if not prove entirely toothless, without Russia. Our country is obviously a centre in the multipolar world and has always been one, even after the collapse of the USSR [10]. Therefore, speaking about its «mission» throughout times, epochs, political systems, ways and manners, it is necessary to recall the name of Fyodor Dostoyevsky rather than Petr Chaadaev [6].

In his famous Pushkin Speech, our great compatriot Fyodor Dostoyevsky said that «beyond all doubt, the destiny of a Russian is pan-European and universal», and that «to be a true Russian does indeed mean to aspire finally to reconcile the contradictions

of Europe» [1, 147-148]. The concept of «universal justice» may be inherent in our mentality like in no other. Disregarding this circumstance and the fact that we have sometimes paid a dear price for our unusual generosity and the readiness to respond to whatever is needed (Afghanistan), one cannot correctly comprehend the Soviet foreign policy in the twentieth century. How miserable in this case are the attempts of some Western politicians to equate Soviet communism to German Nazism! The Soviet empire, as it is now called, was, in fact, «an empire the other way round». Instead of seizing someone else's possessions, it mostly preferred to give its own, which may have brought its end closer. One should not forget, however, that attempts to fulfil its truly global mission were not the history of failure, but they also resulted in great achievements and triumphs, like the victory over Nazism and the first manned flight, the contribution to the maintenance of universal peace, to the elimination of colonialism, to the reduction of WMD arsenals, and to highlighting the socio-economic aspect of the notion of «human rights» on the global agenda.

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ЕВРАЗИЙСКАЯ ВЕЛИКАЯ ДЕРЖАВА В СРЕМИТЕЛЬНО МЕНЯЮЩЕМСЯ МИРЕ: МИССИЯ РОССИИ В XXI СТОЛЕТИИ

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В статье рассматривается вопрос об историческом контексте российской внешней политики и его практических последствиях. Автор указывает, что недавние крупные события в сфере международных отношений нельзя понять адекватно без учёта траектории российской идентичности. Исходя из этого, статья разделена на три части, которые демонстрируют важность контекстуального подхода к российской внешней политике. В первой части рассматриваются изменения в международном балансе сил и необходимость концептуализации сложившегося положения, с учётом имеющихся различных взглядов и подходов. Во второй части автор рассматривает практические соображения в контексте данной концептуализации, имеющие целью смягчение нынешней напряжённости между Российской Федерацией и западными государствами. В третьей части представлен обзор российского подхода к обеспечению долгосрочной международной стабильности, справедливости в широком смысле слова и принципу взаимного уважения государств.

Автор приходит к выводу, что глубокие изменения в международной системе не привели к значительным переменам в российской стратегической культуре и стратегическом видении. Статья также доказывает несостоятельность распространённой идеи об имплицитном колониаторстве как основном элементе стратегического мышления России. Исторический контекст российской внешней политики доказывает противоположную точку зрения, что российская идентичность гораздо больше связана с разрешением разногласий и созданием условий для взаимного диалога. Более того, автор считает, что основной причиной такого подхода является относительно стабильная международная позиция России (с точки зрения столетий, а не десятилетий).

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика, историческая миссия, Россия, взаимный диалог.

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