

“Civilizational Realism”

A Chance to Bring Theory Back
in Touch with Real Politics

Boris V. Mezhuyev

Abstract:

The article expounds the conceptual content of “civilizational realism” as part of the international relations theory that could help bridge the painful gap between science and practice increasingly manifest in the West, yet even more so in Russia. The ideas of “civilizational realism” are compared with similar views of leading U.S. political experts who brood over the present world order and Russia’s place in it. Some suggest resolving existing contradictions between Russia and the West by reaching an agreement with the “civilizational leaders” of the Euro-Atlantic region to create a demilitarized buffer zone made up of limitrophe Eastern European states.

Keywords: Civilizational realism, leadership, delegated hegemony, limitrophe states, buffer zones

Boris V. Mezhuyev

PhD in Philosophy, Associate Professor at the Chair of History of Russian Philosophy, Philosophy Department, Moscow State University.

Scopus Author ID: 56329752800

IstinaResearcherID (IRID): 1118037

Tel: +7 (495) 939-1925

E-mail: borismezhuyev@yandex.ru

Address: 27, Bldg. 4, Leninskie gory, “Shuvalovskiy” uchebno-nauchnyi korpus, Moscow State University, 119234, Moscow, Russia

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The theory of international relations is going through an obvious crisis caused by a drift away from current political realities. Conceived in the West by former diplomats such as Edward Carr and influential public intellectuals such as Hans Morgenthau, today the theory of international relations, in its key aspects including liberal institutionalism or constructivism, has veered far away from practice, making its most prominent representatives known only to a narrow circle of experts. Even Realist theoreticians, who are better versed in conducting a dialogue with practitioners and who often act as both academicians and politicians, have fallen out of the Anglo-Saxon political mainstream dominated by people who are completely deaf to conceptual recommendations. However, void of adequate theory, practice degenerates into a series of improvisations. In fact, John Mearsheimer, one of the most influential living theoreticians of neorealism, believes that theory which rejects practical conclusions is unsatisfactory, and politics which ignores scientific concepts is fundamentally unfair (Mearsheimer, 2001: 9). The previous three U.S. administrations based their foreign policy actions on a theory, albeit unsatisfactory, of “a democratic world” and “democracy promotion” implemented through U.S. power policy. These conceptual constructs, poorly thought-out and insufficiently substantiated, caused a series of geopolitical catastrophes, primarily in the Middle East, but also in relations between the West and Russia. “Civilizational realism,” which we present in this work, aims to help bridge the painful gap between theory and practice increasingly manifest in the West but even more so in Russia which has no international relations schools of its own and where social science, at best, operates in areas prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon world. As we have already noted in our previous works, “civilizational realism” is a pragmatic breakdown of Vadim Tsymbursky’s geopolitical concept but, above all, his analysis of dynamics in the Europe-Russia system, which he set forth in his book *Morphology of Russian Geopolitics and Dynamic of the International System of the 18th-20th Centuries* (Tsymbursky, 2017: 59-117).

Born in early 2017, the strategy of “civilizational realism” was designed to solve one practical task—substantiate the possibility of an

agreement with the West, primarily the United States, on the status quo in Eastern Europe that is acceptable for Russia. The sides could agree to create a demilitarized zone of buffer states separating Russia from the Euro-Atlantic region, providing mutual security guarantees and ensuring the territorial integrity of these states and the right of their ethnic and sub-ethnic groups to cultural and linguistic identity. Outstanding Western geostrategists such as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski contemplated such a possibility (the range of opinions on this issue among American experts is studied in Mezhuev, 2015; Mezhuev, 2018). Practically the entire “realistically”-minded part of the American foreign policy establishment believed such an agreement could be possible and expected the Trump Administration to reach one. But at this point, one can only hope that a future administration, preferably Democratic, could reach an agreement if it is headed by realistically-minded pragmatists. There are quite a few of them among the Democratic Party’s experts, even though their perception of Russia and its interests may be corrected from the “civilizational-realistic” point of view.

Despite statements by Western political experts, Russia is neither “revisionist” nor “revengeful.” Its foreign policy was, and is, conservative and its main goal is to preserve and maintain the status quo in Europe that emerged after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Russia is not seeking to revise the existing balance of power, but nor will it tolerate attempts to stamp out its regional influence, which is the West’s principal goal.

A FIASCO OF “DELEGATED HEGEMONY”

In order to protect its right to regional influence, challenged by the overwhelming majority of politicians and experts advocating liberal-fundamentalist views, Russia cannot but consider itself a social phenomenon different from the West; in other words, a special “civilization” with its own orbit and power of attraction. Naturally, Russia can explain its right to a special “sphere of influence” by its special sense of belonging to Europe and its greater sense of enlightenment with regard to the countries to which such influence could be applied.

Let us call this policy “delegated hegemony” (a situation where the “right” to international hegemony in the near abroad is delegated to Russia by the collective “West” in exchange for its loyalty on matters of global politics). This approach prevailed in Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Soviet period. At some point it was stated quite straightforwardly as was the case when Andrei Kozyrev was foreign minister. At other times this stance was combined with the “multipolar world” rhetoric, creating an odd symbiosis of consistent globalism and the “balance of power” strategy. Obviously, “delegated hegemony” within a clearly defined sphere of influence served the interests of the Russian political and especially economic elite that sought the status of a great power, but at the same time feared isolation from the Euro-Atlantic community.

The problem is that forces advocating stronger pro-Western views than those of the incumbent authorities will always have influence in Russia’s top political circles. And this will make vulnerable any post-Soviet regime which has opted for “delegated hegemony” as its “grand strategy.” Sooner or later the regime will have to defend its right to power before its Western-leaning contenders. The only convincing way to do this is to appeal to a stronger sense of patriotism. And this sense of patriotism includes, among other things, an ability to go against the consolidated opinion of the Euro-Atlantic community and its hegemon’s policy at crucial moments. But such pushback by Russia will immediately challenge the entire strategy of “delegated hegemony.” In order to overcome internal resistance in 2003, Vladimir Putin joined the Franco-German opposition to U.S. plans to invade Iraq, thus straining his relationship, by that time almost a partnership, with George W. Bush. The response was immediate: in 2003 the U.S. launched its democracy promotion program, making Mikhail Saakashvili, the hero of the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia, its first beneficiary. At about the same time it became clear that Russia could only achieve regional hegemony by fighting the Euro-Atlantic community rather than agreeing with it.

By the middle of 2017, Russia had used up all possible means of integration with the West as a geopolitical actor. At this point, all hopes for a revival of the “delegated hegemony” strategy must be dropped. This leaves no alternative to Russia but appeal to “civilizational”

rhetoric as a marker of its special distinction from the Euro-Atlantic community, regardless of how we conceptualize this distinction or define its origin. This became quite obvious in 2018 when Putin, addressing the World Russian People’s Council, spoke of his country as a special “civilization” and cited Nikolai Danilevsky, the founder of this concept. “...it is impossible to imagine the history of humanity without such unique civilizations as India, China, Western Europe, America, and many others. It is really a multifaceted complexity where each facet supplements and enriches the others. I would like to remind you of the words said by prominent nineteenth-century Russian thinker Nikolai Danilevsky: ‘No civilization can call itself supreme, the most developed one. Today the understanding of the complexity of civilizational development provides the foundation for building a multipolar world and defending the principles of international law. The weight and the influence of its poles on the common development will, of course, be determined by their economic, scientific, cultural, spiritual, and human potential’” (Putin, 2018).

REALISM IN THEORY AND LIFE

The question is where the recognition of Russia as a special civilization will lead it. But before answering this question, let us take a look at another component in our formula—the notion of ‘realism.’ Unlike other foreign policy concepts, realism has one important distinction: it is both a special theory of international relations and at the same time a trend in the foreign policy thought advocated by members of the establishment in many countries. It is hard to distinguish one from the other, because a person may often be a realist in three ways at the same time: an academic scholar, an expert on concrete aspects of current policy, and an incumbent politician.

It is not easy to say whether a realist is more of an academic scholar than a political expert or politician or vice versa. Sometimes the political component of one’s career is accentuated by the academic one. The most vivid example is Henry Kissinger. Or it could be a recognized scholar with an indisputable reputation trying desperately to break free of the narrow academic bounds and make his way into the world of concrete

political expertise in hope that his recommendations will be heard and taken into account one day. The most impressive example of this category is John Mearsheimer (on U.S. politics of the latest decades see Mearsheimer, 2018). It would hardly be a mistake to say that realism, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, is the point where academic science and practical politics come closest together. Alternative theories of international relations, such as constructivism or, to a lesser degree, liberal institutionalism, mark the tendency to separate theory from practice. On the other hand, such influential trends in foreign policy thought like neoconservatism have no powerful representatives in the academic theory of international relations but, strangely enough, have them in sociology and comparative political science. Suffice it to recall Seymour Martin Lipset or Jack Goldstone.

And yet, realism in politics and realism in the theory of international relations are two different, albeit connected, phenomena. The founder of neorealism in international relations, Kenneth Waltz, who died in 2013, was a stranger to practical politics. At the same time, one of the Realists' leaders, General Brent Scowcroft, who was national security adviser to two presidents, Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush, definitely is not a scholar. Realpolitik as a phenomenon dates back to Bismarck and Disraeli, but political realism as a school of international relations theory emerged much later. It is believed to have been founded by political theoretician Hans Morgenthau, who managed to escape Nazi Germany. It would not be wrong to say that Morgenthau tried to bring into American political thought the underlying principles of the successful continental policy, which allowed European powers to pursue their national interests while avoiding a big war from 1815 to 1914.

The main postulate of classical realism (and one of its six principles stated by Morgenthau in his 1948 book *Politics Among Nations*) is that the political sphere cannot be separated completely from morality but must not be narrowed down to it either. It is impossible to explain or justify all actions taken by the state solely by supreme moral or ideological principles. The state has its own logic of functioning and its ultimate criterion is national interest, which should be defined

as a desire to achieve the maximum possible amount of power in a world of an inevitable plurality of actors. The theoretical premise upon which political realism is based is the hypothesis that peace among nations is endangered not so much by their egoistic interests, which are correlated one way or another through diplomacy, as by lofty ideas, supreme principles, and super precious moral tenets, the consistent implementation of which leads to a big war. But Morgenthau did not deny the fact that morality played a certain role in politics and could not be overlooked completely.

The pluralism of “civilizations” is a fact of life which definitely is not underlain by any universal moral concept or a specific “grand ideology,” be it Liberalism, Communism, or Nazism. Any “grand” ideology is meta-civilizational as it seeks to transcend the diversity of civilizations. On the other hand, it is natural for any person attached to a certain system of values to think of it as a universal one. For all our tolerance towards other opinions, we can hardly imagine calm diplomatic communication or trade with a civilization of cannibals or an ethnic group which practices human sacrificial killings.

Although “civilizational pluralism” has its limits, consistently implemented “civilizational monism” is inseparable from totalitarianism. Countries and peoples enjoy an indisputable right to have different views on the place of traditional religion in society, social acceptance of sexual deviations, the rights of women, sexual minorities, and children, etc. Naturally, the readiness to give up universality in these matters stems from our doubts about the correctness of the solutions chosen by the progressivist Euro-Atlantic vanguard. In this respect, the idea of plurality of “civilizations” is a result of the universalistic morality crisis essentially caused by the unstoppable process of secularization in the West.

If this is so, then we can assume that Western civilization is not the only center of attraction and that other countries are also able to attract nations, or ethnic and sub-ethnic groups outside their territory. Faced with the need to choose between two centers, such states, as Huntington predicted in his famous 1993 essay *The Clash of Civilizations?*, will inevitably be tested for their ability to stay integral.

Obviously, the events of 2014 in Ukraine bore out Huntington's theory. However Western experts, including Realists, believe that attraction to Russia, at least among those regions of Eastern Ukraine that opposed the coup d'état in 2014 and turned to Putin for support, is nothing more than a product of the Kremlin's special political technologies. Russia simply does not have enough "soft power" to attract other peoples.

"RUSSIA-CENTRISM" AS A PRECONDITION FOR "CIVILIZATIONAL REALISM"

American political scientists working for the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, Timothy Colton and Samuel Charap, have undertaken a major project to describe the history of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and its consequences. Their approach looks at the conflict through the struggle between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community for control over the limitrophe states that divide their civilizational spaces. Their research was released in 2017 under the eloquent title, *Everyone Loses. The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*.

The political scientists analyzed all details of the conflict over limitrophe states since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the decision on NATO's eastward enlargement adopted in 1996. Overall conclusions made by Charap and Colton are quite "civilizational and realistic," if one ignores the fact that the word "civilization" is absent from the American researchers' vocabulary. In their opinion, the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia should give up the "zero sum" game in their confrontation over limitrophe states, yet at the same time should take the latter's position into account. There can be no Yalta-2 with the division of Europe into spheres of influence. Instead, they should start comprehensive negotiations on "new institutional options for the in-betweens" (as the authors call limitrophe states) which "would serve as a bridge between the Euro-Atlantic institutions and their Russia-led counterparts" (Charap and Colton, 2017: 181).

They do not specify how exactly Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia can become such a "bridge," but one can guess that they mean some kind of temporary or permanent buffer zone free of military blocs,

where the states trapped in the conflict zone would retain their right to political, cultural, and economic self-determination.

Another work is a book by Benn Steil, one of the American Foreign Policy Council leaders, called *The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War*, a fragment of which (an article titled “Russia’s Clash With the West Is About Geography, Not Ideology”) appeared on *Foreign Policy’s* website in February 2018. In his book Steil suggests that Russia’s actions in 2014 were motivated not so much by ideology as by geography. Steil argues that, with the exception of Crimea, Russia has never tried to incorporate parts of other countries with a pro-Russian population, since such incorporation would make it extremely hard for it to prevent the Euro-Atlantic community’s expansion to territories adjacent to Russia. At the same time, frozen conflicts in these countries effectively block their admission to NATO (Steil, 2018). On the whole, Steil leads readers to the same conclusion Charap and Colton made: “a neutral status” of limitrophe states is the only possible solution to the dispute between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community, a disagreement which otherwise could turn into a permanent security threat for the entire continent.

So “civilizational realism”—provided it is not branded in any way—becomes a guiding star for all rationally thinking experts who try to find a way out of the Eastern European impasse. This can only be welcomed. Moreover, these experts belong to the opposition Democratic, not Republican, Party, as evidenced by their texts, which place most of the responsibility for the problems in relations between Russia and the West on the George W. Bush Administration and conservative-minded Republicans who controlled the House of Representatives in 1994. According to this logic, Clinton, who ordered the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and promoted NATO’s eastward expansion, and Obama, who authorized the bombing of Libya in 2011, are much less responsible for what happened. From the historical point of view, this is a far-fetched assumption. However, from the viewpoint of current policy, these signals may indicate that it could be easier in the future to come to an agreement with the Democrats on the basis of “civilizational realism” than with radical American nationalists driven by unbridled state egoism.

But it is not accidental that this new democratic realism rejects the word “civilizational.” Colton and Charap clearly deny Russia the right to have “soft power”: for them our country is no more than a geopolitical and geoeconomic giant to be reckoned with. The West should take Russia’s interests into account and look for compromises together with it, but it should always remember the “undeniable” truth that no people would ever want to join Russia of its own free will, and all neighboring countries will try to break free of Russia’s influence and join the Euro-Atlantic community. However, not all of them will be able to join it because the Euro-Atlantic community cannot absorb everyone. But this frustrating circumstance cannot serve as testimony to Russia’s attractiveness.

Therefore, the West should not agree to “Russia’s domination in neighboring countries.” “In fact, the further enlargement of Russia-led institutions in the region is not a plausible solution either, regardless of what policy the West adopts. Those already in the Russian institutional fold remain there either under duress or for lack of better options; most would likely run for the exits if they could.” The authors state, with all analytical mercilessness, that “there is little support anywhere else for the Russian blueprint for regional governance” (Charap and Colton, 2017: 178).

This is an example of “realism” that does not allow genuine “Russia-centrism” anywhere, including Russia’s neighbors, for which our country and the Euro-Atlantic community are fighting a fierce geopolitical and geoeconomic battle, but not a “geo-cultural” one, which Charap and Colton believe our country has no chance to win.

Is this skepticism about Russia’s “soft power” and “Russia-centrism” really justified? Does the Russian civilization have a gravitational field? Or does no such civilization exist? Or is it simply a center of military and economic power to deal with in order to avoid a military conflict with unpredictable consequences, but which cannot be respected sincerely? American experts consciously ignore certain facts from the history of “civilizational competition” for Ukraine. The authors of *Everyone Loses* do not mention the people’s rebellion in Sevastopol in February 2014 (see for that matter: Mezhuev, 2017: 11-13) or

the efforts of pro-Russian activists in Crimea who tried to prevent Ukraine’s signing an association agreement with the European Union, which ignored the opinion of the country’s pro-Russian population. Obviously, admission to the EU’s visa-free travel zone at the cost of breaking cultural contacts with Russia would have been completely unacceptable for many people in Crimea and Sevastopol and a major part of south-eastern Ukraine.

This proves that Russia does have “soft power” and “Russia-centrism” does exist as a phenomenon. In other words, there is “Russianness” not only as a national, but also as a civilizational identity: many people in Ukraine did not want to become Ukrainians, but they did not want to become Europeans either, fearing that they would stop being Russian after that.

It is also noteworthy that while discussing limitrophe states the American political scientists fail to mention recent political processes in Eastern Europe where Russia and Putin have unexpectedly found admirers, such as the Hungarian prime minister or top Italian government officials. Naturally, this cannot be regarded as a threat to European unity, but still this is a sign of new “Russia-centrism,” certainly not as strong as “Eurocentrism,” but quite real nonetheless. Impartial analysts simply must take it into account.

Russia urgently needs unbiased research into the history of the struggle with the Euro-Atlantic community for limitrophe states. Such research should be based on the assumption that Russia has its own civilizational “gravitational field” with non-zero power of attraction. It will have to identify the factors that generate this field: language, a common history, culture, ethnic origins. There may be some other motives as well, for example, the fear of losing national identity in a multicultural Europe.

The “realism” which serves Russia’s interests should be able to complement “Russia-centrism,” not ignore it. However, it must be remembered that “civilizational realism” is not the same as “civilizational fundamentalism,” for which “Russia-centrism” on any territory is just a pretext for its immediate integration into the sphere of Russia’s interests regardless of the possible costs and consequences.

Another extreme would be “realistic nihilism,” that is, the conscious nullification of one’s own “soft power” for the sake of a peace agreement with partners involved in the “competition of civilizations.”

WOULD “PERMANENT NEUTRALITY” BE ENOUGH?

American experts who are ready to admit that Russia has interests in the near abroad have underestimated the “Russia-centrism” factor, which has led them to arguable and unsatisfactory conclusions and recommendations. The U.S. Democratic Party’s foreign policy think tank, the Brookings Institution, in 2007 issued a monograph written by its full-time employee, well-known military expert Michael O’Hanlon, titled *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*. It threw a not so hackneyed idea to society in order to test the reaction from both parties in the U.S. and the political class in Russia.

O’Hanlon suggested that NATO should officially announce an end to its eastward expansion and reach an agreement with Russia on the neutral status of several countries that form a belt stretching from Georgia to Sweden, with none of them having any prospect of ever being admitted to any military alliance. These countries, regardless of their intentions, will have to maintain “permanent neutrality.” In exchange for a legally-binding guarantee not to move beyond Montenegro, Russia will have to withdraw its troops from all “permanently neutral” countries and never encroach upon their territorial integrity. Interestingly, this potential pact will not address the issue of membership in the European Union or any other economic or cultural alliance with the West. If the future U.S. administration accepts O’Hanlon’s proposal, Moscow will have the right to veto the admission of limitrophe states into military blocs, but it will not be able to block their participation in economic and cultural alliances which do not include Russia.

Almost throughout his book O’Hanlon sort of apologizes for his bold proposal and constantly tries to prove to an imaginary opponent, a typical liberal fundamentalist, that his project should not in any way be regarded as a gift to President Putin or a recognition of Russia’s power, let alone the validity of its criticism of the West. The decision on NATO’s eastward expansion, adopted by the Clinton

Administration, cannot be considered a fatal mistake as renowned scholar and politician George Kennan suggested (see, for example, Kennan, 1997), let alone a violation of some unwritten promise that George H.W. Bush allegedly gave to Gorbachev. America and the West did nothing wrong to Russia; Russia alone is to blame for its current problems—this thought is repeated over and over again throughout the essay (O’Hanlon, 2017).

Nevertheless, there was misjudgment on the part of the West: Ukraine and Georgia were enticed and misoriented by prospects of potential NATO membership, which prompted them to take radical action against Putin’s Russia or its protégés on their territory. In Russia, too, NATO’s expansion played into the hands of revengeful anti-Western forces, but certainly not moderate liberals.

There is no need to argue over these proposals per se. What is important is that their very existence indicates the earnest desire of the Democratic Party think tank to work towards an agreement with Russia, which, however, would be impossible without the consent of the Russophobic alliance of generals and Congressmen, still quite solid for the time being.

But can one say that the ice of liberal fundamentalism has been broken and the American foreign policy establishment is gradually, albeit with reservations, moving towards “civilizational realism;” that is, becoming inclined to admit that other, non-Western, centers of power have legitimate concerns about the way the West manages international affairs? Unfortunately, it is too early to speak about that, and O’Hanlon’s project looks more like another trick designed to deceive Russia— withdrawing troops from the near abroad in exchange for a new promise not to enlarge NATO further east. These proposals are hardly acceptable in their present form. But since some kind of deal with the Americans on the “civilizational destiny” of limitrophe states is to be made someday anyway, O’Hanlon’s book should be regarded as an excellent opportunity for Russian foreign policy experts to hone and update their arguments for upcoming talks, which will take place sooner or later.

How can one argue against the “security architecture” proposed by a Brookings expert? First and foremost, “neutrality” cannot be limited

to just non-admission into competing military blocs. Judging from O'Hanlon's remarks, he is aware of this, but allows his understanding of neutrality to be interpreted very narrowly. For example, Ukraine is not admitted to NATO and is not under the protection of its Washington Treaty's Article 5 on collective defense, but the U.S. and other Western countries start supplying it with all types of weapons to resist Russia. Can Ukraine be considered "a neutral state" in this case?

If Clinton's followers in the Democratic Party really want to conduct a dialogue with Russia on Eastern Europe, the meaning of the term 'neutrality' should be expanded as much as possible. In fact, it should mean not so much "permanent neutrality" as the "demilitarization" of Eastern Europe, and this "demilitarized" zone should also include the Baltic states. It should mean shutting down military bases and withdrawing military contingents from the entire limitrophe territory from Odessa to Stockholm. Until now Russian diplomacy has focused on formal membership of certain countries in NATO, but Russia is objectively interested not just in stopping NATO's eastward enlargement, but in creating a continuous security belt dividing two civilizations: Russian and Euro-Atlantic.

O'Hanlon and his sober-minded colleagues in the Brookings Institution suggest slowing down NATO's expansion on condition that Russia lose these "neutral" states in cultural and economic terms. Here comes the question: Are we ready to lose completely—socio-culturally, of course—Odessa, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Donetsk, Tiraspol, and possibly Sukhumi and Minsk? If we do not want to lose them but want to integrate them into our civilizational world, the question is, how should this world be construed and what should it do in order not to blend completely with the Euro-Atlantic civilization?

The phenomenon referred to by opponents as "globalism" is turning into what Michael Lind in his 2017 article called "blocpolitik" (Lind, 2017). In other words, globalization, hitherto seemingly global, will gradually assume its spatial (and civilizational) boundaries. But if we want to conduct serious talks with the Western (or American) bloc on limits to its expansion and spheres of influence, we need to understand what "a Russia-centric world" is, what it can count on in this dire situation, and

what it is definitely entitled to. Realists should learn not only to demand the impossible, but also to substantiate their demands properly.

RISKS OF CIVILIZATIONAL “LEADERSHIP”

“Civilizational realism” supplements practical prescriptions given by rationally-minded American theoreticians with theoretical substantiation. As a potential scientific theory, “civilizational realism” is based on two theoretical premises: 1) a state-civilization is a rational agent that acts in accordance with its own correctly understood interests; 2) a state-civilization, striving for sovereignty, that is, independence from other civilizational centers, becomes partly dependent on the peoples that want to come under its protection, because the legitimacy of the regime in such a state-civilization becomes conditioned, among other things, on the fact that other nations gravitate towards it. “Civilizational realists” have their own answer to the question about the causes of World War One: as a special state-civilization Russia could not deny protection to Serbia. Otherwise, the Russian regime would have been strongly challenged by internal opponents and would have lost a big part of its supporters. Likewise, in 2014 Russia could not stay away from the conflict in Ukraine in which one side—people living in Crimea and Donbass—counted on its support. But as a state-civilization, the United States, too, could not but sympathize with the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring and the Ukrainian Maidan. This dependence of a state-civilization on external support, which testifies to the existence of its own cultural “gravitational field,” is also part of the reality which must be admitted in order to be able to deal with the problems it creates.

The death of former national security adviser and major geostrategist Zbigniew Brzezinski in the spring of 2017 drew very curt comments. Why had he become so uncomfortable for America that it preferred to forget him? The answer could probably never have been found if it had not been for a diplomatic scandal with Qatar when eight Muslim countries decided to sever relations with it. And things became clear. Isolated on the peninsula, Qatar looks for all possible ways to surpass its powerful neighbors. One of them was the so-called Arab Spring, sponsored and driven by Doha in the first place. Qatar

did much more than any other country to support the Arab Spring and give it ample information coverage. Unlike its regional competitors, this tiny absolute monarchy did not hesitate to support, diplomatically and financially, the most radical Muslim forces in the region, primarily the Muslim Brotherhood which came to power in Egypt in 2012 through democratic elections and was deposed in the summer of 2013 through a military coup carried out by pro-Saudi generals. The Obama administration, which had sour relations with both Riyadh and Tel Aviv, felt sympathetic towards the de-Islamist regime in Egypt and recognized the military coup of 2013 as an unavoidable reality with a heavy heart.

I am not saying that this happened because of the impact Brzezinski's political philosophy had had on the previous U.S. administration and that he was the chief ideologist of a possible deal between Obama and the de-Islamist regime, but Brzezinski's views definitely reflected certain sentiments in the liberal wing of the American establishment, according to which America's leadership in the 21st century could only be ensured by its ability to express and represent the interests of the "Arab street."

Ideology should not be mixed up with conspiracy, and I am sure that Brzezinski was not directly linked to Qatar and did not lobby its interests. He was too critical of its policy with regard to Syria and too supportive of Bashar al-Assad, not fearing to end up in the same boat with Russia, which he disliked so much. Nevertheless, despite all the ties, contracts, and consultations, it is the author of the Grand Chessboard theory who is associated in today's America with the policy that allowed the White House to give the green light to the Arab revolution in 2011, thus triggering an unprecedented wave of Islamic terrorism in the Middle East and Europe.

However, I think that the reticent anathema, to which the late geostrategist has been subjected implicitly or explicitly, will be lifted one day and his role in the history of the U.S. foreign policy will be appreciated. What matters is not how much his advice was right or wrong, but the very phenomenon of the U.S. as a state-civilization. There are only two crystal clear examples of such states: Russia and the United States. Two other potential centers of civilizational construction—India and China, and probably Japan—may also

acquire similar traits in the near future. At least China is definitely working in this direction.

We are talking about a state that is seeking not just influence or control over other nations, but what Brzezinski referred to in some of his latest works as “leadership” (see in particular, Brzezinski, 2012). “Leadership” means an ability to attract others with one’s own cultural, ideological, and political appeal. “Leadership” is reaffirmed by the willingness of people in other countries to come under such a state’s protection and enter into open confrontation with their own governments for that. I doubt that we can find signs of “leadership” in the history of the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian Empires. Neither Vienna nor Istanbul had ever sought to wield influence over the Slavic peoples under their rule. In British history there was the Arab revolt led by Lawrence of Arabia against the Turks, but in our opinion this romantic story was more like the icing on the cake of British military victories and was not a cornerstone for the colonial self-consciousness of the “queen of seas.”

At the same time, Greeks and later Orthodox Slavs in the Ottoman Empire sought support from Russia, which had the same faith, and this became nearly the main justification in the 19th century for the White Tsar’s external expansion and a guarantee for the tsarist regime until its demise in February 1917. Moreover, when the Russian tsar did not want to—as in 1820 during the Greek revolt—or could not for objective reasons—as in 1878 after the Congress of Berlin which returned part of Bulgaria to Turkish rule—come to the rescue of people sharing the same faith, this caused deep disappointment in the regime that was immediately blasted as bureaucratic and non-national. In reality, no factor, be it confessional or ethnic closeness with rebellious peoples, was crucial for public sympathies. The main factor was the expressly stated desire of a certain people to get the Russian tsar’s support, both diplomatic and military, as well as the possibility for Russia to gain “leadership” even at the cost of getting involved in a pan-European war.

We can see the same in U.S. history. The White House had a thousand rational reasons not to want the Soviet Union’s disintegration, but the fact that its peoples appealed to America as a potential guarantor of their independence became the deciding factor in Washington’s choice

of strategy after 1991. Brzezinski was a political theoretician who in his later years insisted that the United States would inevitably face a dilemma: either it gains leadership in what he called “global political awakening” or Pax Americana would fall apart. He understood that if America wanted to regain leadership in the Arab world, it would have to distance itself a little from Israel, certainly from its ultra-right forces; if it sought to remain a leader for Eastern European countries, it would have to play with anti-Russian sentiments; and lastly, if it dreamt about leadership in the Far East, it would have to present itself as a guarantor of the struggle against Chinese hegemonism.

It must be admitted that Brzezinski harbored no anti-Chinese prejudice and was prepared to focus on the first two components of leadership; in his later years, mainly on the first one. But America is living through a period of conservative reaction to the revolutionary hopes and strategies of previous years.

To some extent Russia is going through a similar experience. Both countries have entered a period of “post-spring comedown,” where the ideologists of bygone “springs”—Russian and Arab—have been pushed aside. And yet, it would be naive to think that this is the end of our two states-civilizations, that their elites will be guided only by conservative principles and give up all claims to revolutionary leadership. Their descendants will remember periods of “global political awakening” and national “springs” with nostalgia. The purpose of “civilizational realism” today is to make sure this nostalgia does not become destructive for Europe and all of humankind as it happened in 1914 when the memory of the “stolen victory” of 1878 made Russia’s interference in the Austrian-Serbian conflict inevitable, subsequently drawing great powers on three continents into it (Lieven, 2017: 267-341).

* * *

In conclusion I would like to summarize the theoretical premises upon which “civilizational realism” rests:

1. The world is divided into separate “civilizational blocks” made up of the core and periphery. Peripheral states often include regions gravitating towards different civilizational centers.

2. Russia is one such civilization; it has its own orbit of attraction and it can claim leadership in Eastern and Central Europe.
3. This claim to leadership is permanent for Russia but potentially dangerous for the “status quo” situation in Europe. Russia is committed to this “status quo” and subjectively is not seeking its revision.
4. This contradiction can be resolved by an agreement with the Euro-Atlantic “civilizational leaders” to create a demilitarized buffer zone made up of limitrophe Eastern European states.
5. Rejection of such an agreement will inevitably lead to further fragmentation of Ukraine and Moldova and a possible repetition of the “Ukrainian scenario” in other states neighboring Russia that have an influential “Russia-centric” minority.
6. Attempts to deprive Russia of its regional “sphere of influence” paradoxically strengthen its claim to “global leadership,” thus extremely complicating its relations with the Euro-Atlantic community.
7. Russia needs to give up all efforts to become part of the Euro-Atlantic community and should start viewing it as an “alien” civilizational space, with which integration is impossible regardless of the alignment of forces in it.

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