

On Law, Rights and Rules

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The frank and generally constructive conversation that took place at the June 16, 2021 summit meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden in Geneva resulted in an agreement to launch a substantive dialogue on strategic stability, reaffirming the crucial premise that nuclear war is unacceptable. The two sides also reached an understanding on the advisability of engaging in consultations on cybersecurity, the operation of diplomatic missions, the fate of imprisoned Russian and U.S. citizens, and a number of regional conflicts.

The Russian leader made it clear, including in his public statements, that finding a mutually acceptable balance of interests strictly on a parity basis is the only way to deliver on any of these tracks. There were no objections during the talks. However, in their immediate aftermath, U.S. officials, including those who participated in the Geneva meeting, started asserting what seemed to be foregone tenets, perorating that they had “made it clear” to Moscow, “warned it, and stated their demands.” Moreover, all these “warnings” went hand in hand with threats: if Moscow does not accept the “rules of the road” set forth in Geneva in a matter of several months, it would come under renewed pressure.

It has yet to be seen, of course, how the consultations to define specific ways of fulfilling the Geneva understandings will proceed. As Vladimir Putin said during his news conference following the talks, “we have a lot to work on.” That said, it is quite telling that Washington’s

ineradicable position was voiced immediately following the talks, especially since European capitals immediately took heed of the Big Brother's attitude and picked up the tune with much gusto and relish. The gist of their statements is that they are ready to normalize their relations with Moscow, but only after it has changed its behavior.

The overall impression is as if a choir was pre-arranged to sing along with the lead vocalist. It seems that this was what the series of high-level Western events in the run-up to the Russia-U.S. talks was all about: the Group of Seven Summit in Cornwall, UK, the NATO Summit in Brussels, as well as Joe Biden's meeting with President of the European Council Charles Michel and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen.

These meetings were carefully prepared in a way that leaves no doubt that the West wanted to send a clear message: it stands united as never before and will do what it believes to be right in international affairs, while forcing others, primarily Russia and China, to follow its lead. The documents adopted at the Cornwall and Brussels summits cemented the rules-based world order concept as a counterweight to the universal principles of international law enshrined in the UN Charter.

In doing so, the West deliberately shies away from spelling out the rules it purports to follow, just as it refrains from explaining why they are needed. After all, there are already thousands of universal international legal instruments setting out clear national commitments and transparent verification mechanisms. The beauty of these Western "rules" lies precisely in the fact that they lack any specific content. When someone acts against the West's will, it immediately responds with a groundless claim that "the rules have been broken" (without bothering to present any evidence) and declares its "right to hold the perpetrators accountable."

The less specific the rules are, the freer the hand to carry on with the arbitrary practice of employing dirty tactics as a way to pressure competitors. During the so-called "wild 1990s" in Russia, we used to refer to such practices as laying down the law.

To the participants in the G7, NATO and U.S.-EU summits, this series of high-level events signaled the United States' return into

European affairs and the restored consolidation of the Old World under the wing of the new administration in Washington. Most NATO and EU members met this U-turn with enthusiastic comments rather than just a sigh of relief. The adherence to liberal values as humanity's guiding star provides an ideological underpinning for the reunification of the "Western family." Without any false modesty, Washington and Brussels called themselves "an anchor for democracy, peace and security," as opposed to "authoritarianism in all its forms." In particular, they proclaimed their intent to use sanctions to "support democracy across the globe." To this end, they have taken on board the American idea of convening a Summit for Democracy. Make no mistake, the West will cherry pick the participants in this summit. It will also set an agenda that is unlikely to meet any opposition from the participants of its choosing. There has been talk of democracy-exporting countries undertaking "enhanced commitments" to ensure universal adherence to "democratic standards" and devising mechanisms for controlling these processes.

The revitalized Anglo-American Atlantic Charter approved by Joe Biden and Boris Johnson on June 10, 2021 on the sidelines of the G7 Summit is also worth noting. It was cast as an updated version of the 1941 document signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill under the same title. At the time, it played an important role in shaping the contours of the post-war world order.

However, neither Washington, nor London mentioned an essential historical fact: eighty years ago, the USSR and a number of European governments in exile joined the 1941 charter, paving the way for it to become one of the conceptual pillars of the Anti-Hitler coalition and one of the legal blueprints of the UN Charter.

By the same token, the New Atlantic Charter has been designed as a starting point for building a new world order, but based solely on Western "rules." Its provisions are ideologically tainted and seek to widen the gap between the so-called liberal democracies and all other nations, as well as legitimize the rules-based order. The new charter fails to mention the UN or the OSCE, while stating without any reservations the adherence by the Western nations to their commitments as members

of NATO viewed de facto as the only legitimate decision-making center (this is how former NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen described NATO's role back in 2014). It is clear that the same philosophy will underlie the preparations for the Summit for Democracy.

Labelled as “authoritarian powers,” Russia and China have been named as the main obstacles to delivering on the agenda set out at the June summits. Generally speaking, they face two groups of complaints, loosely defined as external and internal. In external terms, Beijing is accused of being too assertive in pursuing its economic interests (the Belt and Road Initiative), as well as expanding its military and, in general, technological might with a view to increasing its influence. Russia stands accused of adopting an “aggressive posture” in a number of regions. This is the way they treat Moscow's policy aimed at countering ultra-radical and neo-Nazi aspirations in its immediate neighborhood, where the rights of Russians, as well as other ethnic minorities, are being suppressed, and the Russian language, education and culture rooted out. They also dislike the fact that Moscow stands up for countries that have fallen victim to Western gambles, have been attacked by international terrorists and risked losing their statehood, as was the case with Syria.

And yet, the West has reserved its biggest words for the inner workings of the “non-democratic” countries and for its commitment to reshape them so they could fit into the Western mould. This means bringing society in compliance with the vision of democracy as preached by Washington and Brussels. This lies at the root of the demands that Moscow and Beijing, as well as all others, follow the Western prescriptions on human rights, civil society, opposition treatment, the media, governance, and the interaction between the branches of power. While proclaiming the “right” to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries for the sake of promoting democracy as it understands it, the West instantly loses all interest when we raise the prospect of making international relations more democratic, including renouncement of arrogant behavior and a commitment to abide by the universally recognized tenets of international law instead of “rules.”

By expanding sanctions and other illegitimate coercive measures against sovereign states, the West promotes totalitarian rule in global affairs, assuming an imperial, neo-colonial stance in its relations with third countries. They are told to adopt the democratic model of the West, choosing, forget about democracy in international affairs where everything will be decided for them, and keep quiet or face reprisals.

Clearheaded politicians in Europe and America realize that this uncompromising policy leads nowhere, and are beginning to think pragmatically, albeit out of public view, recognizing that the world has more than just one civilization, that Russia, China and other major powers have a history that dates back a thousand years, and have their own traditions, values and way of life. Attempts to decide whose values are better, and whose are worse, seem pointless. Instead, the West must simply recognize that there are other ways to govern that may be different from the Western approaches, and accept and respect this as a given. No country is immune to human rights issues, so why all this high-browed hubris? Why do the Western countries assume that they can deal with these issues on their own, since they are democracies, while others have yet to reach this level, and are in need of assistance that the West will generously provide?

International relations are going through fundamental shifts that affect everyone without exception. Trying to predict where it will take us is impossible. Still, there is a question: messianic aspirations apart, what is the most effective form of government for coping with and removing threats that transcend borders and affect all people, no matter where they live? Political scientists are beginning to compare the available toolboxes used by the so-called liberal democracies and by “autocratic regimes.” In this context, it is quite telling that the term ‘autocratic democracy’ has been suggested, albeit timidly so far.

These are useful considerations, and serious-minded politicians who are currently in power, among others, must take heed. Thinking and scrutinizing what is going on around us has never hurt anyone. A multipolar world is becoming reality. Attempts to ignore this reality by asserting oneself as the only legitimate decision-making centre

will hardly bring about solutions to real, rather than farfetched, challenges. Instead, what is needed is mutually respectful dialogue involving the leading powers and taking into account the interests of all other members of the international community. This implies an unconditional commitment to abide by the universally accepted norms and principles of international law, including respect for the sovereign equality of states, non-interference in their domestic affairs, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and the right to self-determination.

Taken as a whole, the historical West dominated the world for five hundred years. However, there is no doubt that it now sees that this era is coming to a close, while clinging to the status it used to enjoy, and putting the artificial brakes on the objective emergence of a polycentric world. This brought about an attempt to provide conceptual justification for the new vision of multilateralism. For example, rather than promoting the UN's inclusive multilateralism, France and Germany have tried to promote "effective multilateralism" rooted in the EU ideals and actions and serving as a model to everyone else.

By imposing the concept of a rules-based order, the West seeks to shift the discussion on key issues to the platforms of its liking, where no dissident voices are allowed.

This is how like-minded groups and various "calls" emerge. This is about coordinating prescriptions and then making everyone else follow them. Examples include a "call for trust and security in cyberspace," "the humanitarian call for action," and a "global partnership to protect media freedom." Each of these platforms brings together only several dozen countries, which is far from a majority, as far as the international community is concerned. The UN system offers inclusive negotiation platforms on all of the abovementioned subjects. Understandably, this gives rise to alternative points of view that have to be taken into consideration in search of a compromise, but all the West wants is to impose its own rules.

At the same time, the EU is developing a mechanism of horizontal sanctions for each of its "like-minded groups," completely ignoring the UN Charter, of course. This is how it works: those who join these "calls" or "partnerships" decide among themselves who violates their

requirements in a given sphere, and then the European Union imposes sanctions on those at fault. What a convenient method! They can indict and punish all by themselves without ever needing to turn to the UN Security Council. They have even provided a rationale to this effect: since we have an alliance of the most effective multilateralists, we can teach others to master these best practices. To those who believe this to be undemocratic or at odds with the principle of genuine multilateralism, French President Emmanuel Macron offered an explanation in his remarks on May 11, 2021: multilateralism does not require unanimity, and the position of those “who do not wish to continue moving forward must not be able to stop ... an ambitious *avant-garde*” of the world community.

Make no mistake: there is nothing wrong with the rules *per se*. On the contrary, the UN Charter is a set of rules, but these rules were approved by all countries of the world, rather than a closed group at a cozy get-together.

An interesting detail: in Russian, the words “law” and “rule” contain the same root. To us, a rule that is genuine and just is inseparable from the law. This is not the case for Western languages. For instance, in English, the words “law” and “rule” do not share any resemblance. Do you see the difference? “Rule” is not so much about the law, in the sense of generally accepted laws, as it is about the decisions taken by the one who rules or governs. It is also worth noting that “rule” has the same root as “ruler,” which is a commonplace device for measuring and drawing straight lines. It can be inferred that through its concept of “rules” the West seeks to align everyone around its vision or apply the same yardstick to everybody, so that everyone falls into a single file.

While reflecting on linguistics, worldview, sentiment, and the way they vary from one nation or culture to another, it is worth recollecting how the West has been justifying NATO’s unreserved eastward expansion towards the Russian border. When we recall the assurances given to the Soviet Union that this would not happen, we hear that these were merely verbal promises, and no documents were signed to this effect. There is a centuries-old tradition in Russia of making

handshake deals without signing anything and holding one's word as sacrosanct, but it seems unlikely to ever take hold in the West.

Efforts to replace international law by Western "rules" include an immanently dangerous policy of revising the history and outcomes of the Second World War and the Nuremberg trial verdicts as the foundation of today's world order. The West refuses to support a Russia-sponsored UN resolution proclaiming that glorifying Nazism is unacceptable, and rejects our proposals to discuss the demolition of monuments to those who liberated Europe. They also want to condemn to oblivion momentous post-war developments, such as the 1960 UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, initiated by our country. The former colonial powers seek to efface this memory by replacing it with hastily concocted rituals like taking a knee ahead of sports competitions in order to divert attention from their historical responsibility for colonial-era crimes.

The rules-based order is the embodiment of double standards. The right to self-determination is recognized as an absolute "rule" whenever it can be used to an advantage. This applies to the Malvinas Islands, or the Falklands, some 12,000 kilometers from Great Britain, to the remote former colonial territories Paris and London retain despite multiple UN resolutions and rulings by the International Court of Justice, as well as Kosovo, which obtained its "independence" in violation of a UN Security Council resolution. However, if self-determination runs counter to the Western geopolitical interests, as it happened when the people of Crimea voted for reunification with Russia, this principle is cast aside, while condemning the free choice made by the people and punishing them with sanctions.

Apart from encroaching on international law, the "rules" concept also manifests itself in attempts to encroach on the very human nature. In a number of Western countries, students learn at school that Jesus Christ was bisexual. Attempts by reasonable politicians to shield the younger generation from aggressive LGBT propaganda are met with bellicose protests from an "enlightened Europe." All world religions, the genetic code of the planet's key civilizations are under attack. The

United States is at the forefront of state interference in church affairs, openly seeking to drive a wedge into the Orthodox world, whose values are viewed as a powerful spiritual obstacle for the liberal concept of boundless permissiveness.

The insistence and even stubbornness demonstrated by the West in imposing its “rules” are striking. Of course, domestic politics is a factor, with the need to show voters how tough your foreign policy can get when dealing with “autocratic foes” during every electoral cycle which happens every two years in the United States.

Still, it was also the West that coined the “liberty, equality, fraternity” motto. I do not know whether the term ‘fraternity’ is politically correct in today’s Europe from a “gender perspective,” but there have been no attempts to encroach on equality so far. As mentioned above, while preaching equality and democracy in its own countries and demanding that others follow its lead, the West refuses to discuss ways to ensure equality and democracy in international affairs.

This approach is clearly at odds with the ideals of freedom. The veil of its superiority conceals weakness and the fear of engaging in a frank conversation not only with yes-men and those eager to fall in line, but also with opponents with different beliefs and values, not neo-liberal or neo-conservative ones, but those learned at mother’s knee, inherited from many past generations, traditions and beliefs.

It is much harder to accept the diversity and competition of ideas in the development of the world than to invent prescriptions for all of humanity within a narrow circle of the like-minded, free from any disputes on matters of principle, which makes the emergence of truth all but impossible. However, universal platforms can produce agreements that are much more solid, sustainable, and objectively verifiable.

This immutable truth struggles to make it through to the Western elites, consumed as they are with the exceptionalism complex. As I mentioned earlier in this article, right after the talks between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden, EU and NATO officials rushed to announce that nothing had changed in the way they treat Russia. Moreover, they are ready to see their relations with Moscow deteriorate further, they claimed.

Moreover, it is an aggressive Russophobic minority that increasingly sets the EU's policy, as confirmed by the EU Summit in Brussels on June 24 and 25, 2021, where the future of relations with Russia was on the agenda. The idea voiced by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron to hold a meeting with Vladimir Putin was killed before it saw the light of day. Observers noted that the Russia-U.S. summit in Geneva was tantamount to a go-ahead by the United States to have this meeting, but the Baltic states, siding with Poland, cut short this "uncoordinated" attempt by Berlin and Paris, while the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry summoned the German and French ambassadors to explain their governments' actions. What came out of the debates at the Brussels summit was an instruction to the European Commission and the European Union External Action Service to devise new sanctions against Moscow without referring to any specific "sins," just in case. No doubt they will come up with something, should the need arise.

Neither NATO nor the EU intend to divert from their policy of subjugating other regions of the world, proclaiming a self-designated global messianic mission. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is seeking to proactively contribute to America's strategy for the Indo-Pacific Region, clearly targeted at containing China, and undermining ASEAN's role in its decades-long efforts to build an inclusive cooperation architecture for the Asia-Pacific region. In turn, the European Union drafts programs to "embrace" geopolitical spaces in its neighborhood and beyond, without coordinating these initiatives even with the invited countries. This is what the Eastern Partnership, as well as a recent program approved by Brussels for Central Asia are all about. There is a fundamental difference between these approaches and the ones guiding integration processes with Russia's involvement: the CIS, the CSTO, EurAsEC, and the SCO, which seek to develop relations with external partners exclusively on the basis of parity and mutual agreement.

With its contemptuous attitude towards other members of the international community, the West finds itself on the wrong side of history.

Serious, self-respecting countries will never tolerate attempts to talk to them through ultimatums and will discuss any issues only on an equal footing.

As for Russia, it is high time for everyone to understand that we have drawn a definitive line under any attempts to play a one-way game with us. All the mantras we hear from the Western capitals about their readiness to put their relations with Moscow back on track, as long as it repents and changes its tack, are meaningless. Still, many persist, as if by inertia, in presenting us with unilateral demands, which does little, if any, credit to their ability to properly assess the situation.

The policy of having the Russian Federation develop on its own, independently and protecting national interests, while remaining open to reaching agreements with foreign partners on an equal basis, has long been at the core of all its doctrinal documents on foreign policy, national security and defense. However, judging by the practical steps taken over the recent years by the West, they probably thought that Russia did not really mean what it preached, as if it did not intend to follow through on these principles. This includes the hysterical response to Moscow's efforts to stand up for the rights of Russians in the aftermath of the bloody 2014 government coup in Ukraine, supported by the United States, NATO and the EU. They thought that if they applied some more pressure on the elites and targeted their interests, while expanding personal, financial and other sectoral sanctions, Moscow would come to its senses and realize that it would face mounting challenges on its development path, as long as it did not "change its behavior," which implies obeying the West. Even when Russia made it clear that we viewed this policy by the United States and Europe as a new reality and would proceed on economic and other tracks from the premise that we cannot depend on unreliable partners, the West persisted in believing that, at the end of the day, Moscow "will come to its senses" and would make the required concessions for the sake of financial reward. Let me emphasize what President Vladimir Putin has said on multiple occasions: there have been no unilateral concessions since the late 1990s and there never will be. If you want to work with us, recover lost profits and business reputations, let us sit

down and agree on how we can meet each other halfway in order to find fair solutions and compromises.

It is essential that the West understands that this is a firmly ingrained worldview among the people of Russia, reflecting the attitude of the overwhelming majority here. The “irreconcilable” opponents of the Russian government who have placed their stakes on the West and believe that all of Russia’s woes come from its anti-Western stance advocate unilateral concessions for the sake of seeing the sanctions lifted and receiving hypothetical financial gains. But they are totally marginal in Russian society. During his June 16, 2021 news conference in Geneva, Vladimir Putin made it abundantly clear what the West is after when it supports these marginal forces.

These are disruptive efforts as far as history is concerned, while Russians have always demonstrated maturity, a sense of self-respect, dignity and national pride, and the ability to think independently, especially during hard times, while remaining open to the rest of the world, but only on an equal, mutually beneficial footing. Once we put the confusion and mayhem of the 1990s behind us, these values became the bedrock of Russia’s foreign policy concept in the 21st century. The people of Russia can decide on how they view the actions by their government without getting any prompts from abroad.

As to the question of how to proceed on the international stage, there is no doubt that leaders will always play an important role, but they have to reaffirm their authority, offer new ideas and lead by conviction, not ultimatums. The Group of Twenty, among others, is a natural platform for working out mutually acceptable agreements. It brings together the leading economies, young and old, including the G7, as well as BRICS and its like-minded countries. Russia’s initiative to form a Greater Eurasian Partnership by coordinating the efforts of countries and organizations across the continent holds powerful consolidating potential. Seeking to facilitate an honest conversation on the key global stability matters, President Vladimir Putin has suggested convening a summit of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council that have special responsibility for maintaining international peace and stability on the planet.

Efforts to bring more democracy to international relations and affirm a polycentric world order include reforming the UN Security Council by strengthening it with Asian, African, and Latin American countries, and ending the anomaly with the excessive representation of the West in the UN's main body.

Regardless of any ambitions and threats, our country remains committed to a sovereign and independent foreign policy, while also ready to offer a unifying agenda in international affairs with due account for the cultural and civilizational diversity in today's world. Confrontation is not our choice, regardless of the rationale. On June 22, 2021, Vladimir Putin published an article titled "Being Open, Despite the Past," in which he emphasized: "We simply cannot afford to carry the burden of past misunderstandings, hard feelings, conflicts, and mistakes." He also discussed the need to ensure security without dividing lines, a common space for equitable cooperation and inclusive development. This approach hinges on Russia's thousand-year history and is fully consistent with the current stage in its development. We will persist in promoting the emergence of a culture of international relations that is based on the supreme values of justice and enabling all countries, large and small, to develop in peace and freedom. We will always remain open to honest dialogue with anyone who demonstrates reciprocal readiness to find a balance of interests firmly rooted in international law. These are the rules we adhere to.