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## THE MODERN WORLD ORDER: STRUCTURAL REALITIES AND GREAT POWER RIVALRIES

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**Abstract.** The article suggests that the contemporary mode of interactions between leading global and regional actors is not transitional, but sustainable, thus constituting the world order for the near future. Providing a theoretical context, the article claims that over the last thirty years neoliberal and neorealist schools of thought have prevalingly focused on verifying their pre-established explanatory models with post-Cold War examples, rather than studying these realities as such. This article is based on the assumption that tremendous developments have occurred in this period. The new set of global and regional actors can be taken for the new, multipolar hardware of the global system; its software is shaped by new structural realities, within which actors operate. These are conceptualized as the mismatch between material globalization and the decline of ideational universalism: the latter determines conflict while the former limits escalation. The article outlines the mode of competition within these structural realities, i.e., indirect coercion. This mode makes neoliberal institutional world order unfeasible; however, within this mode it also becomes virtually impossible to strike a balance of power as is so central to the neorealist theory. Within the terms of the game theory, interactions between leading actors fit neither win/win nor win/lose scenarios. The article conceptualizes great power interactions as lose/not-lose competition and not-lose/not-lose collaboration.

**Keywords:** world order, cooperation, competition, globalization, international relations.

Western literature has described the last three decades as a transitional state in global affairs from a bipolar to another world order. The latter's characteristics have regularly been adjusted. Yet, the conventionally accepted view from the late 1980s up to the first half of the 2010s was that the West would inevitably dominate within the "liberal world order", in one way or another.

The conceptualization of the problems that drag out the "transitional period" has changed a number of times. In the mid- and late 1990s, the focus was on the

economic and political transit of post-communist regimes, with the final triumph of the West-centered world hinging on the pace of that transit [Huntington 1991; Przeworski 1991; Carothers 2002]. Later on, much attention was paid to failed states [Harvey 2003; Ikenberry, Rotberg 2004; Newman 2009; Acemoglu, Robinson 2012], “rogue states” [Lake 1994; Derrida 2005; O’Reilly 2007] and international terrorism [Mann 2003; Barber 2004; Ferguson 2005; Tellis 2004; Hindle, Schmid 2009]. Then the focus gradually shifted to the rising powers as the new leaders whose voice on the global stage could no longer be ignored. Accordingly, the parameters of their participation in the global system were debated either as free-riding (benefiting from the international system but not contributing to it) or as far as revisionism, which implies taking advantage of their important standing to revise the codified and uncoded rules and norms in international relations [Tammen et al. 2000; Davidson 2016; Schweller 2015]. The rise of new powers, though, contributed just as well to debates on multilateralism and multipolarity of today’s world [Sakwa 2020].

As China was becoming increasingly assertive, the problem of the “hegemon” and the “contender” was singled out as a separate issue. This stride explored the possibilities of a new power taking the place of today’s most powerful state, and the metaphor of a “Thucydides trap” was widely used for describing the problem [Allison 2015]. This resulted in debates over the importance of non-western actors and the non-western world, on the one hand [Popov, Dutkiewicz 2017; Tsygankov 2020], and over recalibrating relations between the great powers in the Russia–China–US triangle, on the other [Graham 2020].

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Conceptually, the principal debate has all the while been waged between neo-liberals and neo-realists who have interpreted current events from their corresponding theoretical standpoints and expected these standpoints to come true once the transitional period ended. So, current global affairs and patterns of great power behavior were described in applying one of the theoretical lenses. It was either fitting reality into a particular theory or proclaiming the reality as being in need of change from the standpoint of a particular theory in order to shorten the transitional period and quickly arrive at the relevant theoretical ideal.

Major IR schools are largely on standby, waiting for the implementation of their presets in the future. Some believe that there is no reasonable alternative to their approach – one should be a liberal at least out of fear (liberalism of fear): since unchecked power is too dangerous, institutional liberalism offers “a source of hope for improvement coupled with institutional checks against retrogression” [Keohane 2012: 136]. Others believe that the grand design of liberalism is an illusion, and attempts to make it true interfere with the concept of normal realist world [Mearsheimer 2018, 2019].

The Russian academic community has also contributed to research into these key subjects in the intellectual context of global politics [Lukin 1999; Melville 2000; Naumkin 2005; Safranchuk 2018; Shakleina 2019; Istomin, Baikov 2019; Denisov 2020; Sushentsov, Wohlforth 2020], while offering original interpretations of what is conceived as “world order” and of its specific features in various periods

[Nikonov 2002; Bogaturov 2002; Kosolapov 2002; Batalov 2003; Baranovsky 2010; Arbatov 2014; Simonia, Torkunov 2015; Tsygankov 2018; Kortunov 2016; Voitovsky 2019; Baranovsky 2019; Karaganov 2019; Dynkin, Telegina 2020]. Russian scholars tended to reject West-centric views of the world order. Yet, while not sharing Western ideas of the desirable – let alone inevitable – universal liberal world order and/or doubting its feasibility, Russian scholars have offered diverging opinions on what Russia's conduct should be amid tangible attempts to establish a liberal world order. They have also diverged on the alternative to the West-centric liberal world order. However, Russian experts and their counterparts in the West alike have mostly viewed the present as being transitional in nature.

While Russian and Western scholars have largely agreed that the world order is currently in transition, their opinions differed as to the endpoint of this transition as well as its direction. Recently, both sides are increasingly speaking about the world order collapsing or disintegrating.

This article adopts a different approach. The expectations of the emerging world order to be harmonious that were widespread late in the Cold War and in its immediate aftermath fell through. Still, absence of such a world order is not enough reason to speak about today's world as being in transition. Our premise is that significant changes have already taken place – what we witness today is no harbinger of something new, nor is it a transitional stage, interesting solely from the perspective of what is to come next. Together, the existing realities and normative paradigms shape the world order as a system of relations between the leading powers which is stable enough, i.e., self-reproducing. The research objective of this article is to analyze the current reality and identify patterns and causal relations – in other words, to conceptualize the current state of affairs while verifying and qualifying the provisions of major theories along the way, as their tenets failed to produce expected outcomes.

#### **ISSUES IN STRUCTURING THE LATE 20<sup>TH</sup> – EARLY 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WORLD ORDER**

The principal authors of IR theories approached the end of the Cold War believing that an American super-hegemony – that soon materialized – is rather improbable.

In the early 1970s, advocates of liberalism conceptualized their views on what caused decline throughout the inter-war period and what ensured success of the post-World War II development. They concluded that the international chaos of the 1930s stemmed from the absence of a hegemon state. Since there was no state capable of maintaining rules and order, the Great Depression and World War II ensued. The leading role of the U.S. after 1945 and America's contribution to international cooperation made the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a time of economic growth and the proliferation of democracy. Classical liberals believed in the functionally positive role of a hegemon, and it was important for them that such a nation infuse its leadership with what they saw as the proper content, such as encouraging cooperation or promoting social progress. Since the mid-1960s, however, the interdependence phenomenon came under discussion as

a consequence of international cooperation [Cooper 1968; Young 1969]. This discussion picked up pace in the 1970s [Keohane, Nye 1977; Transnational Relations... 1972], with liberal authors tracing the transformation of “interconnectedness” into “interdependence,” while endowing the latter with new attributes.

States and non-state actors largely bear the consequences of what happens in other states or within the international system as a whole (connections without consequences are *interconnectedness* rather than *interdependence*). Such consequences have reciprocity to them; however, they are not necessarily symmetrical. For major powers, such consequences meant being vulnerable to external effects, and they were deemed to be more adverse. It followed that great powers were becoming relatively weaker, losing their hold on global affairs. Such thinking led some scholars to the “middle power theory,” stipulating that the states previously overshadowed by “big powers” would play a greater role, would have enhanced freedom of action and an opportunity to show their mettle [Holbraad 1984; Wood 1987; Higgott, Cooper 1990] (in later years, their role in global affairs did, indeed, see new avenues, with their bilateral relations becoming more important [Pyatakov 2020]). Even so, the overarching liberal thought claimed that a hegemonic world order was becoming unattainable. Consequently, in order to implement the normative paradigms of liberalism, other means were needed, such as international institutions, norms and rules. Together, they would form a self-supporting and self-developing system involving everyone that would not need a powerful and “ideologically correct” guarantor. As such views took shape [Keohane 1984], classical liberalism is believed to have undergone such a significant transformation that it became a “new” liberalism, neo-liberalism (or institutional liberalism).

Realists believed that interdependence hardly entails qualitative changes. They viewed international institutions as instruments that states employ in pursuing their policies, refuting claims that the power of the mighty is in decline [Waltz 1970; Rosecrance, Stein 1973]. States are similar in their aspirations but differ in their capabilities, and the structural distribution of capabilities results in rivalry as opposed to cooperation (once such views took shape, realists also became “neo-realists”). So, hegemonic impulses to ensure one’s own security [Waltz 1979] or exert power over others [Mearsheimer 2001] are natural for states. Since it is, however, equally natural that aspirations of some states run into resistance from other states, balances of power emerge that preclude an absolute worldwide hegemony from emerging in reality. By the end of the 1980s, realists were expecting the U.S. to become relatively weaker and to transition into a key center of a multipolar world [Kennedy 1988] rather than evolve into a super-hegemon.

In fact, in the post-Cold War environment, the U.S. asserted tremendous material and ideological dominance. In this situation, contrary to neo-realist thinking, the distribution of capabilities and power was tipped in favor of the US to such an extent that it demotivated other actors from engaging in rivalry with it. All states – barring those

“rogue states” having no chance of coming to agreement with the U.S. – attempted to fit into the system of American leadership and come to grips with U.S. superiority instead of balancing it out, let alone challenging it.<sup>1</sup> The global hegemonic leader and the order it maintained were put into practice. This ran counter to the neo-liberal theories claiming such a development to be impossible amid interdependence. The U.S. superiority and its ability to shape global affairs were so significant that they outweighed the restricting effect exerted on power by interdependence.

Subsequently, both theories were somewhat modified to fit in with the realities of the American superiority.

The ideas of maintaining American leadership through a new set of instruments known as “soft power”, gained traction with neo-liberals. When the notion was first presented [Nye 1990], it was not widely recognized, as it was overshadowed by both the neo-liberal interpretation of after-hegemony and the neo-realist vision of balance of power as a natural obstacle to global hegemony. Later on, though, neo-liberals brought soft power to the fore to transform it into a fully independent concept in the early 2000s [Nye 2004]. Initially, soft power was described as an essentially American toolbox for the era following traditional power dominance. Yet, soft power soon turned into an area of competition recommended to everyone. Even though Joseph Nye initially believed soft power would arrive on the heels of hard power (soft power can bring about what cannot be achieved with hard power, which does not mean soft power can be used to obtain all the things obtained through hard power) and later combined them into “smart power” (i.e., not afterwards, but together) [Nye 2009]. In such a manner, the view of soft power taking the place of hard power became widespread. Conceptualizing soft power as the principal area of international rivalry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century meant that America had a clear head start in this sphere since its soft power potential is qualitatively and quantitatively greater than that of others.

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At about the same time, offensive realism proliferated through the ranks of neo-realists [Mearsheimer 2001]. Both theoretical approaches thus sought either to explain (as objectivistic realists did) what was happening to U.S. foreign policy or to recommend (as normatively minded liberals did) what to do with it. Yet, both still stuck to their basic standpoints on matters of principle. Realists believed global hegemony to be implausible even if the natural strife for it was bound to entail balances of power. Liberals, on the other hand, believed that the U.S. had to gradually transfer its power over global affairs to international institutions [Bhagwati 2004; Drucker 1999; Soros 2004], while stepping aside in the long-term [Nye 2003]<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It was well conceptualized for both Russia and the rest of the world as “pluralistic unipolarity” [Bogaturov 1996, 2002].

<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the neo-liberal approach has for decades consistently supported the basic liberal idea: a “good” hegemon is a guarantor of international cooperation, openness and systemic stability [Keohane 1984; Nye 1990; Ikenberry 2001, 2018].

So, both theoretical approaches expected their fundamental presets to be put into practice in the future, while interpreting the realities of today's world from the perspective of how far they are implemented instead of analyzing the world as it was.

In the meantime, the world was changing. A major structural transformation followed the collapse of the bipolar system in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Several states made real breakthroughs, primarily China and India. After a period of weakening, Russia regained its capabilities. Other BRICS and G20 countries made significant steps forward, too [Denisov et al. 2019]. The economic significance of these actors is almost universally underpinned by their military potential: fifteen G20 states account for about 80% of global military spending. There emerged a circle of what may be called a renewed cast of leading global actors – previously dubbed as great powers (Russia, the US, China, India, the EU) – and significant regional powers capable of influencing the global agenda, even if to different degrees (Germany, France, the UK, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Brazil, Australia).

Figuratively speaking, the global system received a new hardware [Lukyanov et al. 2020: 20–21]. This is largely the very “fabric” that both neo-realists and neo-liberals hoped to achieve – a world without total U.S. dominance, one that is interdependent globally (as neo-liberals suggested) and multipolar structurally (as neo-realists indicated). So, the global system's hardware is substantive, palpable polycentricity. Yet, there is no software whose inevitability and/or desirability would be justified by the two principal theoretical schools.

62 The leading global actors are far from entrusting their destiny to international institutions and regimes as neo-liberalism prescribes. They do not, however, recognize or set down balances of power that would serve as the pillars for stability, while maintaining those balances would form the basis for cooperation as actors would have to do in accordance with the neo-realist approach.

#### **NEW STRUCTURAL REALITIES: A GLOBAL NON-UNIVERSAL WORLD**

What was in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century labelled globalization – following several decades of the world's growing interdependence and its new (or not entirely new) quality – may, in a broader context, be viewed as the merging of two processes that had been increasingly intertwined over the two or three previous centuries. These are the world's increased physical connectedness (material globalization) and its increased ideational integrity (ideological homogeneity, universalization). These processes have not been linear; frequently, events have driven nations apart – physical connections between them could be cut to turn them into ideological opponents. Ultimately, however, all major political, economic and social upheavals, be they colonialism or outcomes of great wars, contributed to shaping a truly global economic and political system and enhanced the world's connectedness [Chanda 2008].

The exchange of ideas has not been symmetrical. The strong and the victorious imposed their ideological paradigms on those over which they gained control or influence. Yet, the weak did not shy away from borrowing from the strong.

These were mostly material borrowings but they were sometimes intertwined with ideological ones. Recipients attempted to separate these two types of borrowing; for instance, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire debated on how to borrow only the West's military, technical and material achievements without its social and political practices [Lewis 2002: 82-95]. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, however, modernization theory established correlation between material development and a broad social modernization [Lipset 1960: 45-76]. While the Cold War split the world into two adversarial camps, it simultaneously contributed to universalization. Both systems laid claims to universality and rolled out their economic models and concomitant values and ideals. Incidentally, both camps resorted – states and communities in the West still do – to conditionality when it comes to material and technical aid, tying it to introducing particular ideological and political institutions.

From an idealistic perspective, the collapse of the USSR could be interpreted as the crown of the Hegelian process of dialectical development [Fukuyama 1989] or, from a rationalistic one, as the triumph of a Western geopolitical agency, the U.S. and its allies [Krauthammer 1990]. In any case, though, the world was seen as global and largely universal. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, material globality and ideological universality reached their historical peaks to be fully identified one with the other.

The process was interrupted in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Material globalization seized to be equivalent to ideological universality (homogeneity). Materially, the world remains globally integrated despite the tendency towards fragmentation that has emerged over the recent decade. However, the aspiration for ideological homogeneity – a space based on common values – has been entirely crushed [Safranchuk 2020]. The process of universalization has come to an end.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, dozens of developing states used their material successes to bolster their “identities” so as not to “dissolve” in universal (liberal) values<sup>3</sup>. While previously expected to entrench such universalization, the Internet and social media facilitated it slowdown and reversal. Instead of unifying societies, social media contributed to their atomization as well as emergence of scarcely-connected cells based on shared views and interests. Instead of spreading the “universal glad tidings” and modern liberal values from global centers, new technologies boosted alternative voices; instead of enshrining universalization, they helped develop diversity, with the communicative field beginning to fragment; instead of erasing identities as some experts expected [Lash 2002], identities began to get autonomized [Nye 2003: 95-99]<sup>4</sup>. These developments justified questions whether democracy and liberalism are no longer identical [Zakaria 2003].

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<sup>3</sup> The topic of diligent “students” succeeding through borrowing basic development models and then beginning to criticize many aspects of their “teachers” and to protect their “uniqueness” was curiously manifested in the interview Lee Kuan Yew, the “father” of Singaporean reforms, gave to Fared Zakaria for *Foreign Affairs* in 1994 [Zakaria, Yew 1994].

<sup>4</sup> Recently, global technological platforms have stepped up their efforts to remove the undesired content and are acting precisely within the universal liberal paradigm.

Today's structural reality is a materially global – yet, ideologically non-universal – world, with a discernible trend towards further de-universalization. This contains an inherent contradiction. The world is too non-homogeneous for the current level of material globality, while its global material connections are excessive for the increasing level of non-universality. Entities that are too different are too closely connected.

In a materially global, interconnected and “tight” world characterized by weak ideological homogeneity, perceptions of danger are on the rise, much as the demand for politicizing and securitizing all agendas possible. Under such circumstances, rival powers find it hard to arrive at and set balances of power. Consequently, the stability element that is central for both realists and neo-realists does not work as it is used to. Simultaneously, the world is too non-universal for international and global institutions to function effectively, for countries to trust their destinies to them and thus achieve agreement on practical issues. As a consequence, the institutional element that neo-liberals see as the foundation of the system's stability does not fully work either.

So, the imbalance between material globality and ideological diversity inhibits both basic theories. Should one of the elements gain the upper hand, it would produce the conditions enabling one of the theories to prevail. The temptation to “adjust” reality by using political means is visible, through either launching an ideological project to push re-universalization or tipping the world towards material de-globalization. In both cases, the structural imbalance described above, being disadvantageous for both theories, will be eliminated to the benefit of one of them. Today, the division along the lines of “ideological universalization or material de-globalization” has both theoretical and politically practical dimensions.

Still, ideological universality – essentially uniformity and one-way thinking – can only be imposed, with attempts to do so regarded as a security threat and a challenge to national sovereignty, thus prompting fierce resistance. The idea of material de-globalization, especially in its radical manifestations, also provokes rejection among the greater part of the international community – even though to different degrees in different countries – since most states base their social and economic development on a model that puts a premium on material globalization. So, even though the combination of material globalization and ideological non-universality as well as the imbalance between the two do “inhibit” the basic theories, this, nonetheless, is a stable structural reality that informs behavior of global and regional powers.

#### **CONCEPTUALIZING TODAY'S RIVALRY AND COOPERATION**

Direct military confrontation between the leading actors remains highly improbable, if not entirely impossible – at the least, none of the actors considers it a reasonable rivalry option. At the same time, the impulse toward fierce competition is great, and it is taking on two principal forms. First, this has to do with attempts to undermine competitors through indirect impact; second, it is the readiness for a controllable clash of interests in important regions (a situation when the scale and intensity are under control and do not acquire an “independent” escalation dynamics).



All leading global actors have domestic problems, both of economic and social dimensions. This opens up major opportunities for the so-called hybrid warfare or attempts to apply non-military pressure on a competitor's internal weak spots. The nature of this rivalry is further complicated by the fact that unfriendly territories exist in virtually all regions where the leading actors are located, and these territories could be used as a catalyst to their domestic problems. Actors attempt to put pressure on their competitors/rivals by proxy, using an unfriendly state that serves as a lever for transmitting and increasing negative influence, as it is geographically proximate to the pressurized state, besides, being locked in conflict with it.

Most leading global actors and influential regional players are involved in hybrid warfare. This mode of competition results in incessant tensions in a number of areas, with such competition being convoluted and contradictory, lacking symmetry and direct parity. All this makes it harder to achieve and acknowledge any balance of power as well as create a mechanism for maintaining it. Competition gets stuck at a stage prior to a balance of power. At the same time, the competition described above does not (as of yet) allow even most acute of the contradictions to turn into overt and major warfare. Instead of open military confrontation, competition involves mutual "besieging" through regional partners. In other words, no one attempts to defeat the other party, whereas everyone attempts to use attrition as their weapon of choice against their competitors.

Leading global actors are concurrently highly active in pursuing political goals in regions beyond their immediate location, primarily due to their economic interests. The interests of these leading actors clash in various regional configurations –whether the Balkans, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa or South America. In some cases, these clashes turn into regional military confrontations in which leading actors are involved to varying degrees, as happened in Syria, Libya and Ukraine [Naumkin 2018; Markedonov et al. 2020; Markedonov, Silaev, Neklyudov 2020].

Leading global actors have not yet quite identified the most effective forms and methods for participating in regional conflicts. Direct large-scale involvement does not always produce the desired results. Moreover, in some instances, it shrinks the prospects for achieving these results. Yet, mediated actions are not particularly effective either. It is important for the leading global actors to possess and make use of their expeditionary military capabilities to pursue direct engagement in conflicts beyond their own geographical regions. They have to protect their interests and assets without becoming overburdened with military commitments. All the leading actors are gradually learning to do this. Russia is more successful in Syria, the U.S. is somewhat less successful in Iraq and Afghanistan [Safranchuk 2017a, 2017b].

Private military companies are becoming a rapidly growing force employed by leading actors for indirect and non-obligatory involvement, while their activities may go beyond purely military objectives, extending into politics and communications. This aligns well with the features of today's conflicts as described above. PMCs have not become independent actors, although they tended to be heading in that direction in the 1990s. Back then, they were capable of independently conducting fully-fledged local conflicts as a force to be reckoned with in small regional clashes, fighting on the

side of TNCs, international and non-governmental organizations as well as third-world governments. However, governments of large states later on became the principal clients of the most successful PMCs. Today, private entities can be truly effective only as part of this combination – major global actors act as the source of equipment and personnel as long as their subcontractors pursue their interests.

For global actors, interaction with regional partners is an important element of their effective involvement in regional affairs, particularly in armed conflicts. The interests of these regional partners and their views on specific situations might significantly differ from the approaches taken by global actors, and the latter have to take this into account. Several agendas, as well as local and supra-regional contradictions, get intertwined in regional affairs, which makes it harder to find full-fledged solutions to reconcile regional differences and establish stable balances of power.

Concerns that competitors might make use of internal weaknesses and vulnerabilities are exacerbated because none of the leading actors can shut itself off from the world, thus ensuring protection from outside influences. Specific manifestations of the outside world dependence differ: it could be dependence on foreign markets, technologies, capital or, for that matter, external debt. Attempts to reduce such dependence are regularly made, with some producing results and thereby undermining globalization. For the foreseeable future, however, all the leading global actors will inevitably be tied to the outside world – dependence, openness and concomitant vulnerability will thus subsist.

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Global actors are not, however, merely involved in the non-stop process of taking measures and counter-measures in an attempt to gain relative advantages over one another. They are also forced to respond to global circumstances generated within the broader context of the international environment rather than by rival powers. In recent decades, these circumstances have come to be called “new challenges” and “global problems”. These include climate change, global economic imbalances, international terrorism, etc. The path of international and even global cooperation that used to appear quite reasonable for resolving these problems is not entirely feasible under today’s conditions. The starkest example is the environment and climate change – an issue which has, indeed, a global dimension and affects everyone without exception. Even in this area, we see sovereignization of the “green agenda,” a process gradually transforming it into an instrument for economic development and ensuring competitive advantages of individual actors. While unable to resolve these problems, significant global actors can, nonetheless, mitigate their consequences that affect them directly, thus attaining greater stability. This also becomes an area for competition.

We can offer the following generalized perspective on the rivalry between various influential actors in today’s world. Differences resulting from non-universality push them towards competition. “Tight” interdependence, a consequence of material globality, does not afford opportunities for open clashes by limiting escalation – nuclear weapons are also conducive to this. The same interdependence makes it possible to interfere in rivals’ internal affairs, which is where the potential for competition is un-

leashed through hybrid warfare. In an open conflict, escalation of this competition has visible limits. Cognizant of their differences, actors are acutely sensitive to the other parties' interference in their internal affairs, which is why they take counter-measures. Most of the world's great states are going through a painful sociopolitical transformation, having a unique trajectory in every state. Any hint at attempts to influence this transformation from the outside are seen as subversive activities.

Fierce competition extends to many areas and is asymmetrical, as it is not possible to establish a balance of power once and for all. The desire to use other parties' weaknesses is intertwined with the intent to prevent those parties from applying pressure to one's own "sore spots". The result is contradictions in the policies of all the leading global actors, which erodes mutual trust to complicate reaching common ground and establishing a balance of power even further.

Inherent resilience and the capacity for power projection are becoming the key elements of competition. Leading actors are open to active involvement in global affairs while simultaneously attempting to shut themselves off from external influences on their own internal weaknesses. This results in a dilemma of involving in global affairs vs. concentrating on domestic affairs. Besides, the dilemma has a political dimension, namely, whether to invest resources in boosting military potential or in socioeconomic development. No leading global power has so far found a satisfactory approach to this dilemma, while a universal approach is hardly possible at all. However, the state to find a most effective solution to this dilemma will enjoy relative advantages over its competitors.

We can conceptualize such relations between influential global actors in game-theory categories. We shall turn to the "prisoner's dilemma" as it is applied in international relations.

Competition on the international stage has traditionally been a "zero-sum game" (or a win-lose model) when one party's win approximately amounts to the other party's loss. This is what happens when diplomatic or military strife results in one power losing territories and the other taking them over or when the defeated party has to comply with the winner's terms. Gains and losses are not necessarily symmetrical; however, one party winning means the other party losing. The world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a typical "zero-sum game".

The Cold War, with its existential confrontation between the two systems guided by opposing philosophical, political and socioeconomic principles, was an extreme manifestation of the "zero-sum game," a battle to the death. At the same time, the momentum and the scale of rivalry and what could have been its ultimate "cost," a nuclear disaster, stimulated debates claiming that a "zero-sum game" (win-lose) could result in a mutual loss (lose-lose), while a compromise or a mutual win (win-win) was an alternative that could be attained through negotiations. The Cold War found no compromise, as it resulted in the physical and ideological collapse of one of the sides, notwithstanding the attempts to paint the outcome as a "win-win". Contrasting a "win-win" and a "lose-lose" as the alternatives requiring a choice to be made (the choice being obvious) was widespread in the aftermath of the Cold War.

It fitted well with liberal thinking about the qualitative consequences of a profound interdependence.

The unique features of competition in today's world do not fit into any of these "win-win," "lose-lose" or "win-lose" categories.

Since the world is materially global and ideationally non-universal, the former makes mutual loss a possibility, and liberal thought explains it well, while the latter makes it impossible to negotiate compromise "win-win" solutions to the strategic issues on which competition focuses. Because the sides have too little "in common" at the ideational level (values and basic principles of their worldviews) as well as at the practical level of practice (interests and trust). The world is too heterogeneous for "win-win" solutions. Today's actors are too competent and experienced to plunge into the "lose-lose" option, while reflecting on their own actions sets limits for any uncontrollable escalation. Material globality narrows the room for a "zero-sum game". In such a "tight" world, it is rather difficult to take something away, at least with acceptable costs and without running into the inevitable "boomerang effect." Denying a victory through upping the cost of taking action to an unacceptable level is easier than actually securing victory<sup>5</sup>.

Of course, many competitive situations have a "zero-sum game" element to them. For instance, the strife surrounding the Nord Stream 2 pipeline has a "prize," which is a share of the European gas market. Even so, the game around this project cannot be reduced to the "prize" alone, as it has a significant Ukraine element. Russia will lose should it fail to reduce its dependence on Ukrainian transit – and Nord Stream 2, in fact, serves this purpose. The U.S., though, will not gain an equivalent win in absolute terms. For the U.S., the win would be relative and consist in undermining Russia's strategic position. The same logic can be seen in many competitive areas.

The relations in the Russia–Europe–U.S. triangle are another example. Russia's post-Cold War foreign policy discourse was based on the following staple element: difficulties in establishing partnership with the EU stem from it being subordinate to the U.S. within the broader context of the intra-West relations. U.S. military presence and Europe's NATO commitments prevent Europe from "emancipation," hindering a transition to a deeper partnership with Russia. This, however, would be quite a natural and rational move, as it pools the parties' potentials together and bolsters it.

Changes on the international stage in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and, particularly, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century had the trans-Atlantic ties undergo major modifications and, possibly, weaken. The interests of Europe and America as well as their values are diverging, as is their need for each other (if we analyze their real objectives rather than their rhetoric).

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<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon was made manifest by big states participating in the Middle East: the concept of "victory" simply does not apply there. For instance, the debates in the US on the outcome of the Iraq or Afghanistan campaigns focused not on achieving victory but on developing an efficient exit strategy. The campaign against IS (which is banned in Russia) was an exception but it is a unique case of a grave challenge to states from a powerful terrorist non-state entity, which forced a temporary pooling of efforts (or, rather, acting on parallel courses).

This process is non-linear, yet apparently inevitable. And we see that Europe drifting away from the U.S. is by no means tantamount to it moving closer to Russia. On the contrary, the clearer the signs of Europe's disassociation from the U.S., the more the Europeans fear being left face to face with Russia and the more obvious is their desire to fence themselves off from Russia. As a result, Europe-Russia relations are somewhat less pragmatic than it was the case at the peak of the Cold War. Russia is not gaining anything from the trans-Atlantic divergence, the effect being rather the reverse of what is expected.

So, in today's global politics, "win-lose" competition exists alongside a different kind of expanding competition where one party's "loss" does not necessarily mean the other party's "gain," i.e., the other party gaining what the first party has lost.

In a global non-universal world, if one party loses, the other party does not necessarily gain something in absolute terms. From our perspective, this can be best described as a "lose – not-lose", as competition primarily revolves around the idea of making the currently unresolvable global and regional problems have more impact on others than on themselves. To put it simply: make life difficult for someone else; in relative terms, make competition more stiff and costly for your rival than it is for you – at least for a while. This would help free up resources for domestic development. Accordingly, competition principally unfolds in terms of resilience: the sides compete to ensure a greater and stronger resilience for themselves, thus gaining advantage in confronting the inevitable new challenges.

Even so, concentrating on oneself, cultivating one's own ideological identity and egoistical behavior as well as bolstering individual resilience do not rule out international cooperation. When such competition unfolds between a number of global and regional actors, one's own standing may be boosted not only when someone loses – but, on the contrary, when someone does not lose, thereby generating challenges and impediments for the competition. This lays the basis for a "not-lose – not-lose" cooperation.

Such coalitions are softer than alliances in "zero-sum games" or "win-win" international interactions. There can be many coalitions, as they are situational, easily overlapping in an asymmetrical and contradictory manner. Our partner's enemy in a "not-lose – not-lose" coalition might be our partner in another similar coalition. And our partner in one coalition can be partnered with our enemy in the other. Flexible international interactions contribute significantly to bolstering one's own standing.

In suggesting a long-term outlook, we identify several scenarios of how such a global system could develop. First, it could indeed prove to be a dead-end, since it entails very intense competition while producing few absolute benefits. In such a case, a return to the neo-liberal or neo-realist agenda is possible, with active changes to the structural realities. For prospective "win-win" situations under "liberalism of fear" to emerge, there should be willingness to seek a new ideological universalization of today's world as well as consent to such universalization among the rank and file of the international community. Traditional competition based on neo-realist blueprints requires significant material de-globalization and a sharp decline in interdependence, which effectively means that development models of many states would have to change.

This has not been the case for the last two decades, so such prospects appear unlikely today. Apparently, this first scenario is mentioned mainly to cover all options on the table and make our analysis complete, even though we deem it the least probable.

Second, “lose – not-lose” competition is fraught with play-offs which could take on different dimensions. Primarily, it involves one of the major actors collapsing or its inability to remain engaged in fierce competition due to either loss of resources and power projections capabilities or the inability to maintain an acceptable balance between the two. Yet, voluntary retreat from the international strife is a play-off as well. When the number of influential actors shrinks, the system can undergo a major transformation.

Third, since “not-lose – not-lose” international cooperation is based on flexible and overlapping coalitions, at some stage there may appear such a broad coalition that it will decide to enshrine its dominance by bolstering cooperation within itself based on a “win-win” basis for participants, while retaining a “win-lose” basis for non-participants.

Fourth, we might allow for some influential actor – or a coalition of such actors – finding effective solutions of their own to global problems that were deemed to be unresolvable in a stand-alone basis. Such an actor will either gradually accumulate competitive advantages to ultimately win the game and become the new dominant power, or its success will turn it into a role model for other parties willing to imitate its experience. In both cases, competition is likely to become less intense, while the distribution of capabilities would probably change, thus altering the system’s overall configuration.

We should make another remark, taking us back to the key concept of resilience. No global system can be stable unless states, its structural units, are stable as well. In the world order model described above, rational actions undertaken by individual states are intended primarily for retaining their own resilience, and each is interested in an international environment conducive to their efforts. Accordingly, the external and internal components of state policies are connected increasingly closely, with the resilience of the international system depending on that of individual states and vice versa.

The emergence of a “rigid” global system appears unlikely amid the fundamental sociopolitical, technological and climate problems that will inevitably aggravate, at least, in the foreseeable future. In the long term, the described model may be here to stay – owing to its essential adaptivity.

## **CONCLUSION**

The structural realities of today’s world are characterized by a simultaneous presence of material globality and ideological non-universality. The combination of these creates unprecedented conditions where neither of the two principal theories is fully effective.

To be more precise, their effectiveness is limited to operating as critical reflections on one another. Given the ideological non-universality, neo-realist conclusions that a liberal “win-win” grand design is impossible in the global system hold true. Material globality confirms neo-liberal tenets of “win-lose” restrictions on power politics and competition.

The established structural realities are sufficiently stable, since the world exhibits resistance to both ideological universalization (further de-universalization is a more likely prospect) and material de-globalization. In this situation, a stable (self-reproducing) mode of relations between significant global actors is taking shape. It is fierce competition where the loss of one side does not translate into an equivalent win for the other side, which is why it is not a classical “zero-sum game”. Yet there is interest in such a loss, too, since each of the competing sides aims to shift the responsibilities and costs of interdependence on to others. This can be described as “lose – not-lose” competition. International cooperation centers around building various configurations of “not-lose – not-lose” coalitions on a plethora of issues, uniting those with a vested interest in each other “not losing”.

The system we have described will evolve in the future, which does not mean that the system is something temporary or a transition to something else. The current system is full-fledged, as it is determined by structural realities. Its most important feature is the combination of permanent aspirations of actors that seek to influence others and the global situation at large, while remaining resilient to external influences at the same time. Such resilience and the ability to maintain it without recourse to such extremes as isolation is an important feature of international relations that has not been adequately conceptualized so far. We would like to reiterate that the current system is self-reproducing and thus stable. Its principal drawback is that competition is quite intense, while absolute benefits for any significant global actor are rather limited (nevertheless, limited absolute benefits throughout the competition itself may well increase once competition comes to an end).

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## **СОВРЕМЕННЫЙ МИРОВОЙ ПОРЯДОК: СТРУКТУРНЫЕ РЕАЛИИ И СОПЕРНИЧЕСТВО ВЕЛИКИХ ДЕРЖАВ**

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**Аннотация.** Статья предлагает рассматривать существующий мировой порядок, т.е. систему взаимодействия ключевых мировых и региональных игроков, не как переходную, а как устойчивую. Авторы исходят из того, что в последние тридцать лет в мире имели место серьезные трансформации, связанные с изменением материального положения многих стран: в результате сложился обновленный состав значимых мировых и региональных игроков. Это формирует новый, полицентричный hardware мировой системы. Ее software определяется современными структурными реалиями, которые авторы концептуализируют как сочетание материальной глобальности и идейной негомогенности: второе подталкивает к конкуренции, первое задает ограничения для масштабов ее эскалации. Выделяются формы конкуренции между ведущими державами, которые служат заменой открытому конфликту: не прямое воздействие на конкурентов и управляемое столкновение интересов. Модальность такой конкуренции исключает реализацию нелиберальных, институциональных построений, но в ней также оказывается невозможно зафиксировать баланс сил, как предписывают неореалисты. В результате имеет место и не win-win, и не win-lose взаимодействие главных игроков. Авторы концептуализируют современную конкуренцию в терминах «дилеммы заключенного» как lose–not-lose, а международное взаимодействие в рамках такой конкуренции как построение гибких коалиций в модальности not-lose–not-lose, соответственно объединяющих тех, кто не заинтересован в проигрыше друг друга.

**Ключевые слова:** мировой порядок, сотрудничество, соперничество, глобализация, международные отношения.

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