

An Unexpected Indicator of Change

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The fighting in Ukraine has changed the coordinate system in world politics, forcing all countries to take their position on the current events. The picture clearly shows the fundamental processes that are unfolding in the world.

If one takes as a criterion the perception of the Russian special operation proper, the sympathy is largely on the side of Ukraine. The image of a sovereign country attacked by a much more powerful neighbor evokes sympathy for the former and condemnation of

the latter. This attitude prevails worldwide, much stronger in the West, of course, but it is quite common in the East as well.

There was no reason to expect anything different. In Ukraine, Russia is working hard to solve its national tasks that stem from its interpretation of historical justice and appropriateness. For tactical reasons, Moscow denied the true nature of these tasks until the very beginning of the operation and disregards external opinion. The officially declared narrative is intended more

for the internal public (although here too, it is rather incomplete, with evasions and omissions). The international public is offered a set of slogans whose coherence and convincingness can easily be challenged, but this is of little concern to those who voice them. In other words, Russia is sending the conviction of its own rightness and confidence in its abilities, using the available levers of influence on the outside world—not informational, but entirely material. Soft power has never been Russia's strong point, and now it is to be sacrificed altogether for the sake of the aims set (but not necessarily voiced) by a massive use of armed forces. It is believed that if Russia succeeds, its authority as a power capable of taking hard and consistent steps to achieve its aims will strengthen, despite the humanitarian costs.

Generally speaking, a country that decides to act like this has all the reasons to end up in an international vacuum. Not all countries loudly condemn it; many are quite indifferent but prefer to refrain from interaction.

However, something quite different is happening in the case of Russia. It has not been isolated. The reason is that a significant part of the world views the Russian-Ukrainian conflict through the lens of factors that are not directly related to it.

Firstly, a major military conflict, which is something extraordinary for the West, is by no means unique for the non-West. Looking at the fighting in Ukraine from Africa, South Asia, and especially the Middle East, their observers note: just another war. In fact, wars have never stopped in regions beyond the Euro-Atlantic community, and some are still going on today. Many in those regions are even annoyed by such global attention to this confrontation, while wars outside historical Europe, much bloodier in fact, have aroused much less or short-lived interest in prosperous countries. The widespread Western rhetoric about an era of peace and prosperity after the Cold War has been regarded as selfishness and hypocrisy by a significant part of international community.

Secondly, most countries in the former Third World and part of the public in the West see the current drama not as a separate episode, but as the culmination of a conflict that began much earlier and stems from the assertive policy of the United States and its allies towards the territories adjacent to Russia. That is, the West's position is "No matter what happened before, it cannot justify the present events." But in other parts of the world, it sounds rather like this: "What did you actually expect by provoking



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a tiger?” Besides, the expansionist nature of Western policies is a common ground for the non-Western community.

Finally, and this is probably the most characteristic point, the reaction of the majority of people across the globe shows a high degree of their irritation with the West as a whole. It is seen as a hegemon that traditionally abuses its powers. But they are shrinking now, and this allows countries to express their genuine attitude towards the West by refusing to follow the highly recommended anti-Russian policy. The failure of the United States to build an anti-Russian coalition, which has not spread beyond a group of official allies and like-minded countries, is obvious. The reason is not the support of Russian policy, but opposition to the West's attempts to impose its approach on others, which often harms their own interests. Moreover, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the United States is not offering anything in exchange for the support of its position, but is acting through ostentatious admonitions or intimidation.

The stakes in this conflict are really high. Russia's failure to achieve its goals in Ukraine will mean a

strategic fiasco that the U.S. and the UK, Ukraine's key partners, are seeking and expediting. Yet likewise, the West's failure to take Russia down will lead to irreversible shifts in the international hierarchy—not so much in that Russia will rise to a higher level (it will have to solve a huge number of internal problems, which has always been a bigger challenge) but in that the dominant role of Western countries will weaken rather rapidly. The latter would be welcomed by the greater part of the non-Western world, which still harbors strong anti-colonial feelings.

Paradoxically, by fighting for at least partial restoration of its former imperial standing, Russia appears as the flagship of this anti-colonial campaign. How much the country is psychologically ready to associate itself with this part of the world, rather than with the culturally common West, is a big question. In fact, it looks like it is not quite ready. However, there is no other option for the next historical period—not only because of the completely ruined relations with Western states, but also because of the dramatic shifts in the global balance of power.