

When Will This Zap End?

Speculating on the Struggle for a New World Order

Prokhor Yu. Tebin

Prokhor Yu. Tebin, PhD in Political Science

Independent military expert

E-mail: tebin_prokhor@rambler.ru

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the current crisis in Russia's relations with Western countries and possible scenarios of further developments. The author concludes that the West is essentially at war with Russia as the very concept of war is not limited to a direct armed clash but suggests efforts by one power to compel the opponent to fulfil this power's will. The current crisis was precipitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union, which heralded the West's victory in the Cold War. Russia was not included in the Western bloc as a full-fledged member, and the West never intended to recognize Russia's right to become an independent great power. The great power status is an objective necessity for Russia, but its potential does not allow it to confront the collective West on equal terms. One possible solution is further rapprochement with China which has the capability to claim the status of a second superpower.

Keywords: national security, war, collective West, great powers, Russia-U.S. relations, bipolar system of international relations, multipolar system of international relations.

The international system is at a bifurcation point. Many think that the world has become surreal. It has not. Ongoing events are a logical consequence of the processes that have

been developing over the past thirty years, and if we take a broader look, over the past hundred years and more. This is by no means an exaggeration. In fact, this is a rather common phenomenon in history. Suffice it to recall that the Germany-France standoff over Alsace and Lorraine in the 19th and 20th centuries dated back to the Middle Ages. However, thirty years on, almost all the major changes brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union have gone into reverse. Five main reversals clearly stand out today.

Big things are hardly perceptible up close; hence the seeming surrealism. Historians will be able to make sense of the current events not earlier than several decades from now. Some episodes will remain closed to researchers for a long time, transpiring gradually, as they get declassified or recalled by participants. And yet, some information will remain inaccessible or will be lost, and whatever becomes public will inevitably be distorted due to the individual attitude and perception, the future situation or political expediency. But developments in the coming months will determine world politics for many years ahead, and the echoes of the latest events will be heard not only by the present, but also by future generations.

Russia is living through one of the most difficult and significant moments in its history. That is why it is necessary to make assessments, determine landmarks, and tentatively formulate scenarios for the future beyond the bifurcation point.

ABOUT THE WAR

At the beginning of the article, I intentionally used the abstract term ‘ongoing events.’ It is time to clarify what it means. It means war, specifically the war that is being waged against Russia, and the war Russia is waging. It is not about the “special military operation” in Ukraine, or the Lugansk and Donetsk People’s Republics. It is about the war Russia has been fighting against the West for many years now, with its national interests and its very right to exist as an independent state put on the line. This war abates, then flares up again, but never stops, going on and on for decades. But let us take one step at a time.

Carl von Clausewitz's outstanding book *On War* is still relevant today, almost two hundred years after the first publication. Of particular importance to us are the first two chapters "What is War?" and "Ends and Means in War." According to Clausewitz, "War is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will." Further on, Clausewitz notes that by violence he means "physical force," since "there is no moral force without the conception of States and Law." In this particular case, I will allow myself to disagree with such a categorical interpretation. The concept of 'violence' in the context of war goes far beyond the troubles and destruction associated with the use of force and weapons.

Clausewitz compares war to a fight between two wrestlers. This metaphor can be extended. If we liken war between states to interaction between two persons, the key and most important idea would be coercion to fulfill one's will. One has many ways to compel another individual to do something against his will. Apart from using physical force, these include insults, blackmail, or isolation, that is, everything that creates discomfort, worsens one's quality of life or prevents the opponent from achieving his goals. Likewise, one people represented by the state can aggressively influence another people in a variety of ways, not only by using weapons.

Remarkably, the ideas of ostracism and harassment have become deeply entrenched in modern Western society, producing the independent concept of 'cancel culture.' What was introduced into society and tested on individuals, often with the use of false or far-fetched accusations, moves into the realm of interstate relations and turns into one of the forms of war. This has become particularly relevant today given the existence of nuclear weapons and the low tolerance of Western society towards military losses, and, therefore, the willingness of governments to start a full-scale armed conflict. Observing the West's practice of rewriting history for the sake of current interests, the war on monuments, and double standards in matters of freedom of speech and the right of nations to self-determination, we can say with regret that George Orwell's works have not lost their relevance.

War in the broad sense of the word is one of the basic forms of interaction between states, along with cooperation, assistance, and (mutual) deception. At the same time, it is important to understand that absolute autarky, that is, complete rejection of any interaction by an individual state, is impossible. Even such countries as Myanmar, the DPRK, and Turkmenistan cannot completely isolate themselves from the outside world. Moreover, in the event of successful self-isolation, an autarkic state remains open to outside attempts at coercion. To avoid this, a state must be of no interest to anyone or have nuclear weapons, or better still, have both of these advantages. Russia has nuclear weapons, but it will always be of interest to the outside world due to its huge resources and transport corridors on its territory. To close the topic of autarky, it is actually an axiom that no state has enough resources for harmonious and stable development as a complete autarky.

Interaction between states is habitually described by such terms as 'politics,' 'world politics,' or 'international relations.' By defining war as one of the basic forms of interaction between states, we can correct Clausewitz's classical postulate: a war is a form of politics, and its manifestations are not limited to the direct use of armed forces. Thus, sanctions, embargoes, and discrimination against trade and citizens are acts of war in the broad sense of the word, provided that these actions aim to force an opponent to fulfill the other side's will both directly and by crushing his ability to resist, which is based on the entirety of available means and the will to win.

THE UNIPOLAR ILLUSION

Having defined the terms, we must assess the current situation and the nature of the ongoing processes. As most of the facts are well-known and have been described many times, I will not dwell on the events that preceded the current crisis, but note the main things.

World War II was launched to revise the existing world order that did not satisfy anybody. The war was started by Nazi Germany, which acted as the main revisionist and was later joined by another great revisionist power, Japan. World War II resulted in the complete demolition of the existing world order and the formation of a new,

Yalta-Potsdam, system of international relations. Its main beneficiaries were two superpowers—the United States of America and the Soviet Union, both filled with missionary aspirations and seeking to spread their vision of an optimal world order globally. Fundamental ideological contradictions predetermined confrontation between Moscow and Washington. However, it did not degrade into an open armed clash due to the emergence of nuclear weapons and the achievement of military-strategic parity between the two blocs.

The Cold War ended with the defeat of the Soviet Union due to numerous external and internal factors, but mainly due to the exorbitant burden of military spending and inefficient economy. As a result of the defeat in the Cold War, Russia lost the superpower status, the military-political bloc leaning on it, a significant part of territory and population, and many industrial and transport ties. It also suffered a deep economic decline. Yet Russia was able to stay within the borders of the RSFSR and maintain the potential of a great power thanks to the world's second largest nuclear arsenal, huge natural resources and permanent membership in the UN Security Council. However, the Cold War winner—Western countries led by the United States—neither included Russia in its bloc, nor recognized it as a great power.

The United States was euphoric about what then seemed to be the end of history and a unipolar moment. It is worth quoting Charles Krauthammer's article "Unipolar Moment" published in *Foreign Affairs* at the end of 1990 and the beginning of 1991: "The unipolar moment means that with the close of the century's three great Northern civil wars (World War I, World War II and the Cold War) an ideologically pacified North seeks security and order by aligning its foreign policy behind that of the United States." The West made a significant miscalculation. Russia was not ideologically appeased: it was not admitted into the Western community, and did not get sufficient support when it needed it the most, security guarantees or conditions for development.

GREAT POWERS' PROBLEMS IN A UNIPOLAR WORLD

The notion of 'great-power ambitions' has recently acquired a clearly negative connotation. It is not fair. Pursuing the great power status is a

rational, pragmatic and natural behavior for a large state that defends its national interests. In the most general way, national interests boil down to two concepts: security and development. The protection of national interests is the purpose and direct responsibility of the state.

The impossibility of autarky and the need to interact with other countries forces major states to strive for the great power status, which gives them an opportunity to interact with the strongest countries of the time on equal terms, to be a subject rather than an object of international relations, and to prevent the infringement of its national interests by other states.

The above does not mean that all states should strive for the great power status. Firstly, this status is unattainable for many because of their limited potential. Secondly, being a great power and a subject of international relations is not an end in itself, but only an instrument for protecting national interests. A country can also ensure its development and security by delegating part of its own sovereignty to a more powerful state. The classical model is partial delegation of security obligations in order to focus on development. A potential threat from the patron state is neutralized, in particular, by the absence of ideological contradictions and by integration in its production chains.

Great powers and their loyal clients thus have more favorable conditions for protecting their national interests. But the situation becomes more complicated in a unipolar world, as a great power faces a choice: to get closer to the superpower as a junior partner or honorary client, or to live with a constant threat to its sovereignty from the superpower.

It is worth considering the nature of the source of a state's prosperity. In simple terms, there are two of them: trade and services, and resources and raw materials. In the former case, the well-being of a state is based on trade and services, the quality of which depends on human interest. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the high quality of services cannot be ensured through compulsion, and success in trade should be expected only if one is interested in getting the benefit. The supply of resources—grain, hydrocarbons, metals—can be quite effective for the buyer even if the supplier is forced to

sell them. Thus, a state whose source of wealth is trade and services is less interested in the status of great power or client state compared to a country whose prosperity is more dependent on the supply of raw materials. Singapore is an example of the first type, and Russia and Middle Eastern countries belong to the second type.

In a unipolar world, a great power may not be able or willing to form a bloc with the superpower. In this case, it would naturally seek to protect its national interests. Unable to compete with the superpower on equal terms and being tired of this, an independent great power will want to change the current situation, which almost inevitably implies bigger contradictions, hostility and distrust between the world hegemon and this independent power. There are three strategies to do this which an independent power can implement either separately or together.

The first strategy calls for maximizing one's capabilities in order to reduce the superpower's ability to enforce its will. Preferably, capacity development should be comprehensive to strengthen conventional military capabilities, obtain nuclear weapons if it is a non-nuclear state, increase the population, improve geographical location, develop the economy, and find allies.

The second strategy is to weaken the world hegemon and divide its client network with the ultimate goal of depriving it of the superpower status, which will mean a transition to a multipolar world. It is important to note that this scenario can be implemented either through deliberate action by an independent great power or a group of independent great powers, or for objective reasons, including the internal weakening of the hegemon.

The third strategy aims to recreate the bipolar system of international relations, which is both more stable in general and more beneficial for an independent great power. There are also several ways to achieve this. One of them is to strengthen an independent great power significantly so that it could obtain (or regain) the status of a second superpower. Another option is to support a third power so that it could become a superpower. In this case, finding itself in the new bipolar world order, an independent great power gets an opportunity either to join the new superpower as a client state or a junior partner on more favorable terms, or to remain

independent and ensure its national interests through a policy of non-alignment or balancing between the two centers.

A KNIGHT AT A CROSSROADS

The First and Second World Wars showed that even a crushing defeat of one of the parties does not lead to its disappearance. At the same time, World War I proved that the artificial exclusion of great powers from the international system (defeated Germany and later Russia that dropped out of the team of winners due to revolutions and the Russian Civil War) leads to the rapid degradation of the new world order. After the end of the Cold War, this mistake was made again, largely due to the West's shortsightedness and selfishness. As noted above, Russia was not included in the Western bloc and did not receive proper support from the West when it needed it the most. The West began to think that Russia had lost its great power status for good. But Russia simply could not be removed from the world stage, and not even because of its nuclear arsenal.

Soon enough, Russia realized that, having lost the status of superpower, it got nothing in return. The West's overall hostility towards Russia and its interests became more and more obvious. NATO's aggression against Yugoslavia and its support for terrorists in Chechnya are the most striking examples. Russia was denied the position of a full-fledged participant in the global Western project. Meanwhile, Russia gradually restored its economy, rebuilt the armed forces, and solved the most critical internal problems.

In the 2000s, with color revolutions sweeping across the post-Soviet space, it became finally clear that the West did not intend to respect Russia's zone of influence and national interests. This realization was expressed in Vladimir Putin's well-known speech at the Munich Security Conference, which only a handful of people in the West heard and understood. Just like the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, Russia was regarded by the West as the sick man of Europe. Emphasis was put on the encirclement, gradual isolation, and technological strangulation of Russia. The unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence proved quite vividly that Russia's opinion on world politics was completely ignored. However, six months later, the

Five-Day War and the subsequent recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia showed that the Western policy was facing resistance in the post-Soviet space.

Paradoxically, relations between Russia and the West recovered quite quickly to an acceptable level, showing even some signs of possible cooperation. The reason for this was the global economic crisis, the U.S. fatigue from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the Obama administration's desire to dissociate itself from the legacy of George W. Bush. But an error in the word "*perezagruzka*" (meaning reset) spelled as "*peregruzka*" (meaning overload) on the big red button, which was symbolically pressed by Hillary Clinton and Sergei Lavrov in 2009, became prophetic. And so, instead of getting reset, Russian-American relations became overloaded. The West continued to pursue the post-Cold War policy of unilateral transformation of the world in accordance with its own views without any regard for other states. In 2011, this was borne out by the tragic Arab Spring events. Russia was passive during the Libyan crisis in 2011, but in 2012 it began to provide assistance to Syria. Hopes for cooperation between Russia and the West, which bloomed on both sides of the Atlantic in 2009-2010, gradually evaporated.

Everything changed dramatically after events in Ukraine at the end of 2013. After the bloody Maidan protests and the removal of Victor Yanukovich from the presidency contrary to the agreement on the settlement of the political crisis in Ukraine, brokered by Poland, Germany, and France, Moscow apparently realized that its disagreements with the West could not be resolved through diplomacy alone. The stakes were raised, which led to a brilliant and bloodless operation to reincorporate Crimea. The strategic importance of Crimea as Russia's southern bastion can hardly be overestimated. Equally important was the fact that the population of Russia thus increased by almost 2.5 million people.

However, the Russian Spring had a more dramatic side, too. The civil war that began in the east of Ukraine was strikingly different from what we had seen in Crimea. The Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics ended up as unwanted children of the Russian Spring. Russia protected the republics from defeat and forceful reintegration into the

Ukrainian state, but did not resolve or even properly freeze the conflict, leaving it smoldering for the following eight years.

Analyzing events in Ukraine in 2014-2022 is not the purpose of this article. So I will note only key points. Russia pursued a controversial policy towards Ukraine and Donbass, insisting that the Minsk accords had no alternative, while at the same time actively supporting the self-proclaimed republics militarily, economically, and socially. Ukraine clearly and irrevocably turned towards the West and against Russia. Kiev could neither fulfill the Minsk agreements nor abandon Donbass. The conflict was not frozen, and the situation on the separation line remained tense and unstable largely due to the limited territory of the conflict and high population density.

Over the past eight years, Russia has solved the problem of Islamic terrorism in Syria, helped Alexander Lukashenko maintain stability in Belarus amid mass protests, ensured a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan, played an important role in restoring order in Kazakhstan in early 2022, and held out against the COVID-19 crisis. Russia significantly increased its military capabilities in the southwestern strategic area and created a bridgehead in Syria for its military presence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea.

The sanctions imposed on Russia after 2014 negatively affected public sentiments and economic development, and complicated the implementation of some defense projects. The import substitution program, which has strategic importance, was not, and could not be, completed in the time allotted to Russia by history.

Importantly, the pro-Russian-minded sections of the Ukrainian population degraded. Some people moved to Russia or Donbass, some changed their political views after years of propaganda and confrontation, and the rest became a marginalized minority in Ukrainian public and political life. The eight years of war allowed Ukraine to mobilize a significant part of the population for confrontation with Russia, and to strengthen its own army.

At the end of 2018, in an article for *Russia in Global Affairs*, I identified five key threats to Russia's national security. Over the past three and a half years, all five threats have materialized, and while

the crises in Kazakhstan, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Belarus have been resolved, at least in the short term, the confrontation with the collective West and the conflict in Ukraine remain unsettled.

THE ETERNAL QUESTION OF WHAT TO DO

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Twitter post in 2018 is the best epigraph to describe the last three decades of Russian history: "The weak crumble, are slaughtered and are erased from history while the strong, for good or for ill, survive. The strong are respected, and alliances are made with the strong, and in the end peace is made with the strong."

The problem of today's Russia is that it is too distinctive, strong, large, and rich in population and resources to stay out of the struggle for a new world order. At the same time, Russia is too weak to compete with the West on equal terms.

I would not like to be misunderstood: I am not trying to demonize the West. Russia's incorporation in the Western bloc after the end of the Cold War would probably have been a good option for all humankind. Good, but absolutely utopian. Membership in the European Union and NATO would have ensured our security and development for decades. The problem is that none of the EU and NATO members would have benefited from Russia's integration. In fact, the admission of such a large and strong country would radically have upset the balance of power in both the EU and NATO, weakened the U.S. superiority in the Western bloc, and significantly reduced the role of Great Britain, France, and Germany.

In addition, NATO's eastward expansion has embraced weak countries whose political system and statehood are built on the denial of Russia and the Soviet past. This worldview was successfully used by Washington to influence France and Germany, which after the end of the Cold War saw a chance to drift away from the United States both as independent great powers and as European Union leaders.

The European states' tendency towards consolidation and withdrawal from American tutelage, and their idea of military-political identity for the European Union without the United States and NATO could not but worry Washington. The disappearance of the Soviet threat could have caused the Americans to lose, at least partially, control within the

Western bloc. Hypothetically, in the long term, this could have led to the loss by the U.S. of its status as the only superpower and to the rise of the European Union as a new American-friendly, but independent center of military-political and economic influence. To prevent this from happening, Washington needed an adversary that would have forced Europe to rally around the United States. Russia suited this role better than any other country. In the 1990s, Russia was looked upon with disdain and contempt as a miserable shadow of the Soviet Union. A rising Russia, let alone Russia that claimed to be an independent great power, was treated with open hostility. Detente in 2009-2010 turned out to be a fleeting obsession, an illusion that many sincerely believed in not only in Moscow, but also in Paris, Berlin, and Washington. However, history quickly put everything in its proper place.

The only option for Russia is to seek the status of an independent great power. This implies a zone of influence within which Russia will be able to create conditions for its security and development. The standoff with the collective West is doomed to continue. The conflict between an independent great power and the superpower will evolve according to the three strategies mentioned above.

Let us not indulge in illusions, though. Russia has every chance to be an independent great power, but is unlikely to be able to regain the superpower status. This realization was one of the reasons why Moscow advocated the idea of a multipolar world for quite a long time. This strategy has the right to exist, but there are several contraindications. For example, a multipolar world, while being comfortable for independent great powers, is associated with the constant threat of war between great powers and their coalitions. Since they have nuclear weapons, they will fight their wars on the periphery, thus affecting third countries that do not have such weapons. This will encourage third countries to either look for an arbiter capable of ensuring their safety or seek to acquire nuclear weapons. So multipolarity is a very risky world order.

Given this, the strategy of restoring the bipolar world order by forming a bloc with a state that can become a second superpower and offer Russia a partnership on favorable terms appears to be increasingly realistic. I mean China. Conditions are gradually ripening for this.

Over the past fifteen years, the scenario of global confrontation between the United States and China has turned from unlikely to almost unavoidable. In the long run, the situation in the world will change dramatically due to objective processes such as economic development and population growth. By the middle of the century, the share of the United States and the European Union in GWP will shrink, while the share of China and India will increase considerably. The global economic center will finally shift to the Indo-Pacific region. Disparities between the U.S. and its European and Asian allies will grow significantly.

But the weakening of the United States does not mean that it will lose its superpower status. On the contrary, Washington has every chance to remain the world hegemon. To do this, it needs to isolate and restrain China, ensure NATO's integrity and loyalty, and become as close as possible with India as a potential key military-political and economic partner in Asia and a counterweight to China. Russia's role in this scenario is secondary. Washington needs Russia as a bogey primarily for Europe, while the U.S. itself will focus on the confrontation with China. This creates conditions for the emergence of a bipolar or quasi-bipolar system, with the United States and its European and Asian allies, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other.

But Russia's secondary role does not diminish the U.S. hostility towards it. To implement its policy, the West needs Russia's attempts to regain the status of an independent great power suppressed, and Russia itself defeated one more time to teach other revisionist powers a good lesson.

SO, WHAT SHOULD RUSSIA DO?

First of all, it is necessary to ensure stability in the current zone of influence, which includes the CSTO/EAEU, as well as Azerbaijan (the declaration of allied cooperation between Baku and Moscow was signed on February 22, 2022), Georgia, and Syria; resolve the conflict in Ukraine; map out the future and rebuild the economy of the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics. Six million people living in Crimea and Donbass are of strategic importance to Russia. But it must be understood that there must be no further expansion of Russia. In the

future, the protection of its national interests will depend on internal processes and interaction with partners and clients. In its zone of influence, Russia should become a just, predictable, strong, and decisive arbiter and a guarantor of security for other countries, as well as the driver of economic development.

Russia needs to develop its economy and increase the share of trade and services. It should revise and implement its import substitution program based both on self-sufficiency and its own competencies, and on the establishment of partnerships with countries outside the Western bloc, because, as we remember, an excessive fascination with autarky is senseless and dangerous.

Secondly, Russia should increase cooperation with China in all areas, including trade, transport, air, engine- and ship-building, tourism, finance, and so on. A strong military-political alliance with China, by analogy with NATO, is unlikely and does not create significant “added value” either for Moscow or Beijing. The status of a strategic partner and an independent great power is more preferable for Russia than the status of a privileged client of China. However, the latter option cannot be ruled out either. Beijing is closely watching the current developments, assessing their impact on itself and looking towards Taiwan.

Thirdly, it is imperative to develop relations with countries that seek to pursue independent policies in certain regions of the world and have sufficient potential for this. The key ones are India, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, Iran, Egypt, Mexico, and Vietnam.

At the same time, we must clearly understand that there is no end of history or any single scenario and there can be none. In some ways, the mechanics of world politics makes it somewhat similar to the stock market—it is unpredictable, based on rivalry and the totality of a large number of multidirectional processes, partially subject to legal regulation but at the same time vulnerable to periodically emerging “black swans.” It is hardly possible today to say whether the future world will be bipolar, quasi-bipolar or multipolar. But the likelihood of increased tension and instability in world politics, and the threat of a new global economic crisis or local and regional war are quite high.