

# Between Two Special Operations

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In July 2021, six months before the start of the special military operation (Russian official acronym SVO) in Ukraine, the Russian president published an article titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” in which he actually substantiated in detail the inevitability of the future campaign. “Step by step, Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning it into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a springboard against Russia. Inevitably, there came a time when the concept of ‘Ukraine is not Russia’ no longer suited the purpose. There was a need for the ‘anti-Russia’ concept which we will never accept,” wrote Vladimir Putin. And further he wrote: “All the subterfuges associated with the anti-Russia project are clear to us. And we will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia. And to

those who will undertake such an attempt, I would like to say that by so doing they will destroy their own country.”

We will never allow it. We will never accept it. They will destroy it. The warning was more than clear. The author did not offer any equivokes to the readers. Why did most of us not take it seriously enough? Did we not believe it or did we not want to? I dare assume that it was the former. After many years of a simmering crisis in a situation that was quite comfortable for most people, almost no one could imagine a turn to a drastically different kind of relations. Meanwhile, the prefix “anti-,” used nine times in the article mentioned above, is a marker of that new dangerous kind of relations.

### **NOT QUITE A CONFLICT**

From 1989, when the Soviet sphere of influence in Europe began to rapidly disappear, until 2014, when Russia forcefully responded to the seemingly irreversible expansion of the Atlantic sphere of influence to the East, our relations with the West developed within the paradigm of rapprochement, deepening cooperation, and even integration. How much it was done a) consciously, b) sincerely, and c) thoughtfully, can be assessed differently. But even at the moments of increasingly frequent complications and aggravations, Russia did not directly oppose the West. With time, the expression “our Western partners” was intoned by Russian politicians with more and more sarcasm. And yet, no other definition (such as “adversaries,” “opponents,” or “competitors”) was mentioned in the official public discourse.

Positioning Russia as the “Other,” but not an “adversary,” was the underlying principle of Russian foreign policy for twenty-five years. During the first half of that period, the “Other” seemed to be undergoing a transformation so as to become “one of us” for Western partners; they offered encouragement, but not very eagerly. During the second half, they no longer saw the “Other” as qualifying to become “one of us” (and Russia did not view itself as such, either), but all were looking for ways to match interests and needs. It is now clear that they failed.

Importantly, this “incomplete” status made it possible for Russia since the early 2000s to work on the task that Vladimir Putin had proclaimed

as the main one in his very first policy paper titled “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium.” It was published on December 30, 1999, just a day before his appointment as acting president of the country. “Perhaps, for the first time in the past 200-300 years, [Russia] is facing a real danger of sliding to the second, and possibly even third, echelon of world states. To avoid this, we must strain all intellectual, physical and moral forces of the nation,” he wrote.

This is exactly what Russia was doing for almost fifteen years that followed. It made strenuous efforts to secure a place for itself in the first echelon. But its senior members were not eager to welcome yet another newcomer, even though they did not consider it dangerous for themselves either. First of all, they were sure that the possibility of Russia’s joining the first echelon was not anywhere close. Secondly, they believed that Russia would be bound by the standing rules. Earlier, China had joined it on such conditions, and everybody was simply happy about how well it had all worked out.

Russia was restoring its status as one of the world’s leading powers from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s by different means. Most important was cooperation with the West, primarily Europe, in the investment and technological spheres, and Russia’s integration into the global economy. But in parallel, Russia, against the West’s wish (or at least without its support), started looking for ways to strengthen its positions, primarily geopolitical one, on its own. The main effort predictably focused on the post-Soviet space, which also caused maximum friction with Europeans and Americans. But Russia’s activity was not limited just to that and extended to the Middle East, Africa, certain parts of Latin America, and, of course, East Asia. To summarize, while building up the country’s own potential, the Russian leadership used every opportunity that came its way.

Opposition mounted, but the conflict did not turn into an open confrontation. This allowed many countries to establish ties with Russia, while maintaining normal relations with the West. The issue was not brought to a head until a certain moment. Ukraine of 2013 became the turning point. Kiev’s tricks, quite customary for its political culture, designed to seize both opportunities—association with the EU

and preferences within the EAEU—met discontent on both sides. That was the beginning of an acute crisis, which eventually led to the current global military-political clash. The “and-and” option lost its relevance at that very moment, giving way to the “either-or” one. It was also the end of Russia’s attempts to fit into the “first echelon” within the initial blueprint framework.

### **RUSSIA AS THE ANTI-WEST**

The direct and openly declared military-political confrontation between Russia and the West has eliminated a significant part of the tools that Moscow used to expand and strengthen its influence at the first stage of what can be described as “not quite a conflict.” In response to the SVO, which Russia launched against Ukraine as anti-Russia, the West deployed its own “SVO” against Russia as the anti-West. This explains the increasingly fierce nature of the clash and the low probability of its negotiated settlement. Those who are not directly involved in the conflict have no room for maneuvering; they are forced to make a choice.

Russia as the anti-West is changing the global disposition. Before February of last year, many realized that the former universalist order was in decline. But there was no player who would not just criticize its flaws or bypass it, but who would declare its unequivocal rejection and desire to destroy it. Russia took on this mission because of a combination of historical, cultural, geopolitical, and personal factors. If the correlation of these factors were different, perhaps the scenario would be different. However, now the choice has been made. And the speed of changes in the world system proves that they did not occur all at once in 2022 but had developed for a long time. When Chinese leader Xi Jinping was leaving the Kremlin finishing his official visit in March 2022, he said: “Now there are changes that haven’t happened in a hundred years. When we are together, we drive these changes.” This remark is quite momentous, especially since Chinese top officials never say anything in vain. Such is their culture.

The popular question is which country is the senior and which is the junior partner in Sino-Russian relations that “have gone far beyond

bilateral relations and are of vital importance for the contemporary world order and the fate of humanity” (Xi’s another formula). The question is significant for the parties themselves, but it is not essential for the global situation. What is important for it is that an “anti-” conglomerate is emerging. It follows from Xi Jinping’s formula that Beijing sees relations with Moscow as an integral phenomenon, as a separate factor of international relations. This is not an alliance (which China avoids in principle) as it does not suggest assuming obligations, but something close to it. And it is opposed to a clearly defined bloc, which is now called “the collective West.”

It is noteworthy that this bloc closed its ranks to the maximum against Russia after it started the military campaign in Ukraine. China joined the confrontation of its own free will, but in fact the United States has gone out of its way to make it choose the other side of the barricades. Strictly speaking, Beijing was not obliged to join the “anti-” group, and could maintain distance. But Xi Jinping concluded that such a position would not strengthen China’s influence, but, on the contrary, would reduce it. This is the time when countries claiming influence have to make things clear for themselves and get engaged.

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Just three or four years ago most forecasts regarding the world order suggested that a new bipolar system was unlikely. Even if two centers stand out—the United States and China—there will be no 20th-century-like blocs because the interests of universal commercial interaction are too overwhelming. Indeed, the Cold War cannot be reproduced in the same form. But it has turned out that commercial interaction, no matter how profitable, can simply be chopped off for security reasons, understood differently. And wherever business remains, it is unable to prevent geopolitical and strategic rivalry.

As of the spring of 2023, the future looks as follows. There are two opposing “antiworlds” locked in a fight for a new world hierarchy, with two special operations at its heart: Russia against Ukraine and the West against Russia. China’s engagement adds scale to this fight. Countries

outside either group will seek to extract dividends from this struggle, risking dangerous costs. This situation may last a long time.

However, the conglomerates mentioned above are instrumental and created for the phase of war, rather than stable and lasting. Their composition can change up to the point of breakdown into components. Returning to the “echelon” metaphor used by Putin almost a quarter of a century ago. In Russian eshelon also means a special-purpose train, so we can say that the world is now in a situation of “crazy railway switches”: what the train’s composition will be and what it will be heading for depends entirely on an arbitrary set of circumstances. And nobody knows what its final destination for all is, or it simply does not exist.

For twenty years Russia has been strengthening its position on the world stage, using other players’ mistakes prudently and partly opportunistically. Now it is time for Russia itself to set tasks and fulfill them, making its own mistakes and understanding along the way whether these goals are achievable. The stakes are very high for everyone. The result will be a different Russia in a different world built with our direct participation. But no one can say now whether the former will be stronger, more influential and more sustainable, and the latter better and more stable or not.