

Out of Order

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When global tensions began to intensify a few years ago, discussion of major war as a real possibility gradually shifted from the tabloids to respectable analysis. While such a topic had been considered inappropriate, ignoring it became increasingly difficult as the signs of general disorder multiplied.

Many agreed that nuclear weapons prevent a world war, i.e., a direct clash between the great powers. The prospect of total destruction, or at of least unacceptable damage, still restrains

them from the sort of behavior seen in the first half of the 20th century. But history indicates that the international system's transformation is unlikely to be entirely peaceful. Hence it was assumed that the modern version of a world war is a series of local conflicts of various scales, whose outcomes define the new international system. Events since the early 2010s—Iraq and Syria—seemed to confirm this assumption, and they entered into their decisive phase with the outbreak of fighting in Nagorno-

Karabakh, Ukraine, and Palestine. These conflicts, directly linked to the great powers, are painful and destructive, but implicitly motivated by the need to resolve the contradictions impeding the new world order's formation.

In the fall of 2024, such an understanding is in need of correction.

First, regarding nuclear weapons. It is not that they have ceased to function as a deterrent. Their possession by Russia, China—and to some extent Israel—does deter those states' adversaries from actions that they would likely otherwise take to achieve success. But the Ukraine conflict has forced the world to reconsider the limits of nuclear deterrence, i.e., to define what exactly it is able to deter. The current U.S.-NATO proxy war against Russia, in the form of full-scale military support for Ukraine and all-out punitive measures, undermines Russia's security but does not give it formal grounds for a nuclear response. The utility of Russia's nuclear arsenal is thus diminishing. This provokes discussions about lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons and even claims about their inevitable use in a wider number of cases than was previously thought. The debates about the revision of strategic stability are high, pushing the parties involved to expand the limits of what is

permissible in the confrontation between nuclear powers/blocs.

The *second factor* is even more significant. Will the current high-intensity armed conflicts actually lead to the resolution of contradictions and the emergence of a new international order? Let us consider the two main collisions: in Ukraine and Palestine.

The confrontation over Ukraine and the European security system appears to be the central conflict of the international system, whose outcome will decide the latter's future. That is certainly how the conflict's participants see it. But the majority of states (and of humanity) seek to merely watch, casting doubt on this perception.

The confrontation is indeed critical for the parties involved—Russia and the West. Russia is trying to change its status in relations with the Western community, which arose after the Cold War and does not suit Moscow. The West, on the contrary, is using all available methods (short of direct conflict) to prevent such a revision of the Cold War's results and to retain its dominance. The escalating struggle is certainly laden with risks, and it does affect the overall international situation. But any outcome of the conflict—short of a nuclear war, with unpredictable consequences—will not fundamentally change the international situation.

Western victory would not reverse the dismantling of the old liberal order, whose crisis is rooted in tectonic geopolitical, and especially socioeconomic and demographic, shifts. Russian victory, conversely, would not qualitatively accelerate the process, as Russia is now preoccupied with a more significant, in terms of historical perspective, thing—how to define its own post-Soviet identity.

So, the Ukraine conflict has more to do with the past than with the future of the international system. It represents the final sorting-out of relations rooted in the Cold War. Simplistically, Russia considers the Cold War's outcome to be unfair, while the U.S./NATO want to finish what they could not accomplish immediately, cementing that outcome and making Russia's recovery impossible. The rest of the world is ready to benefit from this battle given the opportunity, but does not consider the conflict to be its own, focusing instead on other tasks and challenges.

The Middle Eastern conflict is more illustrative of the contemporary political situation. It is often seen as a projection of the great powers' interests. But the great powers, especially the U.S., are overwhelmed and behaving reactively. One can think up a U.S. interest in any scenario, but it must be precisely that—actively thought-up—since objectively, everything happening in

the region is a burden for the U.S. that cannot be shed. For its own internal reasons, the U.S. cannot distance itself from anything involving Israel.

Israel's campaign has provoked heated debates not so much globally—most of the Palestinians' loudest sympathizers, primarily Muslim and especially Arab countries, are quite indifferent—as within the West, where the establishment's firm pro-Israeli position has collided with broad public discontent. This raises doubts about the commitment to the liberal order of its own champions. This erosion—within the West and globally—will continue, regardless of the war's outcome.

Both conflicts are multi-layered and complicated. The description provided above is superficial but aligns with the notion that these wars will not themselves help resolve disputes or reorder the world, but they inevitably accompany transformations that are ongoing anyway.

The chain of armed conflicts will continue, and many hitherto hidden contradictions will burst into the open. This is natural amidst a general crisis of the system of constraints; hence the growing role of military force, obvious today and inevitable tomorrow. But, as extensive experience shows, military force is only one of the elements of a state's aggregate power. And

although it seems to be gaining preeminence now, the final hierarchy of elements may look different. The crucial factor will be states' ability to build resilience while replacing draining direct conflict with any other form of competition. The more hybrid and indirect the war, the wider the range of possible actions. Cutting the Gordian knot with one powerful strike is a dubious prospect, contradicted by the nature of contemporary international connections.

A sharply competitive but closely interconnected world is a new phenomenon; hence the oddities of wars that are not total and of victories and defeats that are not complete and unconditional. True, total wars, complete victories, and unconditional defeats all are present in the information sphere, but that is different from the real one. (The virtual battlefield sometimes seems to be the more important one, as each side imagines its own preferred world there and freely ignores the other's.)

The states that in Russia are called the World Majority specifically value detachment from others' conflicts because they see this as guaranteeing their own sovereignty. Military confrontation weakens the major powers, limiting their influence on others and providing the others with greater room for maneuver.

This is a global trend that will hold regardless of the ongoing

military campaigns' outcomes. Major states, still propelled by inertia to direct the others, will become increasingly dependent on smaller ones that have no intention of dictating anything to anyone, but are concerned solely with their own selfish interests.

The 'multipolar world' was long a slogan of American hegemony's opponents. It made sense in this context, but now hegemony is ending, and multipolarity has become real. Yet it is not actually an international order, but merely a new set of conditions under which states must operate. And it is not yet clear whether order is, in principle, possible under these conditions.

What follows from all this? Trying to change the world, per se, is pointless, as no one will be able to transform it in the way desired. Processes are largely uncontrollable, although they involve the efforts of various players, each with the same objective: to endure, preserve the ability to develop, and minimize losses. The more countries succeed in this, the safer the entire international system will be. Russia—with its immense potential in resources, logistics, transportation, and economics—will benefit from a lasting peace more than others, because bypassing it is impossible—indeed, unnecessary and unnatural—under normal conditions.