

Downward

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“Please admit bearer to class—detained by me for going up the down staircase and subsequent insolence.”

Bel Kaufman, *Up the Down Staircase*, 1964

The dismantling of the old world order has become a popular topic in recent years. Conceptually, everything is clear and even coherent: the end of hierarchy, the growing influence of various countries and peoples, a complex and unstable but generally fairer system, a new type of relations for a nonlinear world... But now we have entered the phase of these concepts' realization. No one expected it to be comfortable—changes of such a scale never go smoothly. But it is

vertiginous like a rollercoaster. You never know where the next steep turn will take you.

The current global transformation is occurring on two levels that are exemplified in Western Asia (the Middle East) and Eastern Europe.

The fall of Baathist Syria has in a sense replicated the world process in miniature. The Assad family regime did not even collapse, it simply dematerialized without offering resistance. It had completely outlived itself, as understood by its external

patrons, who made no attempt to save their client. Syria in 2024 differs from Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 by its lack of any desperate last stand. The resulting vacuum is being filled with whatever is available, from jihadist internationalists to local ethnoreligious communities to neighbors with their own mercantile interests.

Another feature of Syria (and Iraq and Libya, and apparently now also Sudan) is that the old state's *de facto* disappearance does not mean its formal abolition and replacement by one or more new ones. As one Turkish analyst has noted, Syria, like Iraq, is essentially indivisible. However artificial its colonial-era borders may seem to be (and actually are), they are now firmly established. Any country's dismemberment creates a risky precedent to be best avoided. And most importantly, there are no "natural" alternatives. Every possible basis for division—ethnic, religious, economic, or ideological—cuts across all the others, and none can produce anything durable. The resulting statehood—nominally the same, quite amorphous—is not so much the lesser evil as it is the only acceptable option.

How does this relate to the ongoing global transformation? Relatively uniform globalization—as in the beginning of the century—is over, but the world remains

interconnected, albeit often through hidden, informal, unofficial, or illegal mechanisms. Centralized governance according to fixed rules is being replaced by ad hoc self-organization for survival. Yet the rules are not officially abolished, even though they now work selectively or not at all. While reactions to this trajectory may differ, it is the inevitable result of the crisis in the regulation of interstate relations. And in this sense, the Middle Eastern events are analogous to global ones.

The Ukraine conflict illustrates something else: not the smooth disintegration of institutions, but a battle for the world order. The West is fighting to preserve what was established after 1991, while Russia is seeking to change it. Such a confrontation is fundamental and does not admit compromise. Hence the "escalation ladders," shallow but constant in the case of the West, and belated but now quite steep in the case of Russia.

The Ukrainian collision is an echo of several eras, from the formation and rise of the Russian Empire to the Soviet-American rivalry after World War II. It is undoubtedly of critical importance to its combatants, and it does affect the global balance of power. The international community awaits its outcome so as to gauge the erstwhile hegemon's real power and ability to impose its will.



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But Russo-Western relations no longer determine the entire international agenda. Whatever the outcome, there will be no return to the previous state of affairs, so ardently defended by the U.S. and its allies, as that order's demographic, economic, social, and geopolitical prerequisites are irreversibly gone. Nor are there conditions for establishing a new form of stability—the “Syrian” situation is basically intractable.

Donald Trump's election is likely to change the conceptual approach. “Peace through strength” is not about defending a liberal world order, but about forcibly pursuing American interests as Washington sees fit; less through military action, considered ineffective by Trump, than by every other means. However, the inherited conflict in Ukraine has a different logic, and has gone so far that it probably cannot be transferred to the realm of practical interest that Trump is used to. And it is difficult to foretell what he will do when he realizes that.

2025 promises to be a watershed: changes around the world are so numerous that quantity will inevitably soon become quality.

There are no good options, but there are different ones. In the “Syrian” or “creeping” scenario, the old order continues to unravel, not snapping in a direct clash, but with complex and exhausting multilateral confrontation at every stage. The one benefit of this scenario is its development of self-preservation skills, as the goal is just to pull through. The “Ukrainian” scenario, on the other hand, may lead to a precipitous finale, given the irreconcilability (so far) of the parties' goals. After all, escalation in pursuit of certain victory is a competitive sport that inevitably drives its players to not only calculate, but gamble. And only practice can confirm the assumption that one's opponent will back down at the decisive moment.

The idea of a “ladder” implies something going up, but escalation is more like steps leading down into depths from which it is increasingly difficult to return. In *Up the Down Staircase*, a school student writes: “We're a fast breed because we don't know if there is time ahead or total annihilation of Man.” Sixty years have passed since the novel's publication. Are we still in a hurry?