

Two-Actor Play

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2025-23-2-5-8

In February 2025 it still seemed that the best that could be hoped for, in terms of Russia-U.S. relations, would be a repeat of the Cold War, especially in its form after the Cuban Missile Crisis, when both parties understood that their confrontation had gone too far and needed to be contained within certain limits. There was probably no risk of a direct military clash after that, despite many unpleasant moments.

Then the Soviet Union declared its New Thinking, which some in our country still consider a betrayal. In reality, it was more an attempt to shed the heavy burden of confrontation

and get a respite. But the idealistic concept fell on incredibly fertile soil.

In the West, the situation was not very good either, ranging from the Eurosclerosis (an integration crisis in the EC) to painful neoliberal reforms in the U.S. and UK. Mikhail Gorbachev's idea of abandoning class and national values for universal ones—the USSR's adoption of more liberal stance and a free market—was taken by the West as a blessing for justifying the hard political line, being implemented at that time by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and widely seen as inhumane, draconian, and harmful

to the working class. What followed exceeded all expectations: Russia, the heir to the Soviet Union, suddenly decided to become (literally, institutionally) part of the very West that it had so stubbornly opposed.

What happened next is well known. As far as the pendulum had swung towards Russia's rapprochement with the West from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, it swung back just as sharply by the early 2020s. The conflict in Ukraine led to discussion, for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis, of possible nuclear escalation between Moscow and Washington. And the administration of Joe Biden, supposedly known for his caution, consistently raised the stakes towards the level at which Russia's nuclear warnings would become nuclear threats. In this sense, the (quite radical) change of power in Washington really did represent a step back from an extremely dangerous brink.

And now, just a few weeks into Donald Trump's presidency, there is talk of changing almost the very nature of Russian-American relations—in the direction of cooperation to build a solid new world order. Some Trumpists are saying outright: let's finally solve the Ukraine problem, which Biden has shamelessly inflated in his own ideological interest, let's remove this obstacle and get down to serious and very promising matters.

There is no point in trying to forecast how attempts to settle the conflict will end. For the first time in a very long while, we see genuine diplomacy at work, and its result is never predetermined. Why is it the first time? Is it not what diplomacy is intended to do after all? Diplomacy was understood differently during the past several decades of the West's global hegemony, as acceptance (or at least feigned acceptance) of the West's terms and moral claims, in exchange for quite modest rewards. Since 1990, when the U.S.-led "liberal world order" was effectively established, all of the world's most significant conflicts were resolved this way—or by force, starting with Iraq.

Classical diplomacy—based on the balance of power, on determining which of one's own interests should be prioritized, on achieving their satisfaction in return for the satisfaction of others', and on frank conversations between leaders—cannot guarantee success, but does at least strive for it. The U.S. and Russia clearly value the opportunity that has opened up before them, and do not want to miss it, in which case we would likely see a return to the previous level of confrontation, or even worse.

And here we come to the main question: are we doomed to this constant risk? Is conflict built into the very nature of Russia-U.S. relations?

Historians can bring many arguments in support of this idea and

against it. Even stronger opinions are held by IR specialists, especially those who hold to geopolitical ideas about the eternal struggle between land and sea. But the simple fact remains that fierce conflict between Russia and the U.S. has broken out either when the two are competing for global dominance (the Cold War) or when the U.S. has achieved dominance and tried to force Russia's submission.

Other historical episodes—from the Russian Empire's role in the liberation and strengthening of the North American colonies, to the U.S.'s participation in Soviet modernization in the 1920s and the 1930s, to WWI (until the Bolshevik Revolution), to WWII—did not suggest any sort of unavoidable confrontation. This does not mean that cooperation is predetermined, either. There has always been a wide (perhaps dialectical) ideological gap between Russia and the U.S., and some immigrants from the Russian Empire had very negative memories of their homeland (though this also applies to immigrants from Europe). Nevertheless, the two great powers managed an ambiguous rivalry/cooperation in which they could situationally pursue mutual interests.

That is not possible when the struggle is to seize or preserve world domination, as no compromise is possible there, especially if the domination is based on ideol-

ogy. This was the case during—and on the part of the U.S. and its allies, after—the Cold War.

Donald Trump is trying to change the definition of American hegemony, from global governance to the pursuit of the U.S.'s concrete interests, wherever they might arise. One might argue that one is no better than the other, but there is a difference. Concrete interests are limited, and their achievement requires cooperation with other key actors, including through the deals so loved by Trump. Making a deal with the world's most powerful country requires skill, patience, and some competitive advantages. But it is possible, unlike in the case of a hegemon that enforces not only submission to its interests, but even the adoption of its normative understanding of those interests.

In simpler terms, Trump is trying to make America a “normal country”—but also the strongest one. And this means the opportunity—for other strong countries, or those that have something important to the U.S.—to make those deals.

It is impossible to say what will come out of the Trumpists' ambitious withdrawal. But almost no one disputes that the U.S.'s time as a superpower is coming to an end, just as that of all superpowers did. Even part of the U.S. political establishment acknowledges this. Trump has prompted Americans to understand

greatness in primarily domestic terms. It remains to be seen whether the globalists can retake power in the U.S. in the next electoral cycle or two. But even if they do, a new president will not have the starting conditions that his predecessors did at the turn of the millennium. The peak of the ‘unipolar moment’ has long since passed.

Russia does not and will not seek world leadership, either. But Russia remains and will remain the most important “regional power” (as Barack Obama once termed it, in a manner that at the time seemed terribly offensive). The only thing is, the region of Russia’s preeminence is Eurasia, which under normal conditions cannot be surpassed in resources, demography, logistics, culture, history, or anything else. So regional status is in this case a virtue, not a shortcoming.

Humanity is unlikely to see a “new world order” established in

the foreseeable future. Too much is changing for a balance or stable status-quo to be established. Interestingly, it seemed until recently that the emergence of the ambitious World Majority (the Global South/East, or rather the Global Non-West) would increase the number of competitors for world leadership, complicating and lengthening that process.

Yet the Ukrainian and Middle Eastern crises have shown that even the most powerful members of the World Majority are in no hurry to direct—let alone compete for the right to direct—the future world order. They prefer to wait, watching as the familiar fighters sort things out in the ring. And only once things are sorted out will they decide their own positions—so as to maximally benefit from the new balance. So, the historical backdrop changes, but the main characters remain Russia and the U.S., and it is for them to decide the world’s future.