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RUSSIA AND THE WORLD: RISKS AND PROSPECTS

The Thucydides's Trap

The topic of my report is Russia's place in the today's world, the situation in our country in the years ahead and analysis of arising risks. The lines from one of the verses by Russian poet N.A. Nekrasov describe the current state of affairs fairly well: "There were times worse, / But never meaner".

Recently, there was a meeting of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, the members of which are acting and retired diplomats, journalists, politicians. I had been one of the founders of this non-governmental organization that has been operating since 1992. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov, who is always speaking at such assemblies, made a good point saying that today we were witnessing world disorder instead of world order. The reason of that is that the period, which began after the Soviet Union disintegration and lasted approximately till 2011, when the United States reigned supreme in the world, not worrying for their leadership, is coming to an end. Currently, the world has found itself in the position named "the Thucydides's trap" by one researcher.

What is the Thucydides's trap if we use the language of the 21st century? When a power being the leader in the world arranged according to the unipolar model loses its influence, and another country, conversely, rises, the first one uses all possible methods, including military, to prevent the inevitable. Thucydides wrote about relations of Persia and Greece in his times. Persia had been the global hegemonic state for many years but started losing its influence. However, for one period to replace another in the Hellenic world, Europe had to live through a number of the Greco-Persian wars and large-scale conquests by Alexander the Great.

The measures undertaken by the West that are preventive in many aspects and directed against Russia's attempts to return the world power status, which we made after V. V. Putin becoming the President, also fall into place within the Thucydides's trap framework: the world is becoming more vulnerable because the leader changes. Why sanctions are imposed on Russia today and why provoca-

tions impossible yesterday (such as the Skripal case and the Kerch Strait incident) take place? To be more exact, we are speaking about the interpretation of the said attempts in Western mass media that serves as the basis for new accusations of Russia. It is important for the United States for Russia not to unite with China when the Zero Hour comes. We won't have the vote in this conflict, Russia should, like in the time of Yeltsin and Kozyrev, follow in the footsteps of the United States. Because of that, our President's foreign policy course is absolutely dissatisfactory for the United States leaders. The State Duma applauded the news of D. Trump winning the presidential election in the United States. It seemed to some deputies that with Trump's coming there would be progress in Russian-American relations. Instead of that, they worsened, because relations between states are big politics independent of personal likes and dislikes. The prospect of China and Russia uniting strengthened negative aspects in our relations with the West. Unfortunately, any actions taken by Russia or the United States lead not to relief but aggravation of tension.

The "Rise" of China

In the late 20th century, experts forecasted that China would catch up with America by the middle of the III millennium, but this process takes place much faster. Currently, Chinese gross domestic product exceeds U.S. GDP. This makes the United States worry, and that is manifested in the reactive policy of the U.S. President Donald Trump, who won the presidential election contrary of expectations of the Washington establishment.

Before that the U.S. political elite ruled the world via the alliances that had been established several decades ago such as NATO or new ones formed on Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton initiative – the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Trump systematically refuses from participation in these organizations. He was not allowed to do that in case of NATO but relations inside this alliance are in crisis now, because the United States do not want to pay the lion share of expenditures and demand increase of military expenditures from their allies. Possibly, NATO will be replaced by bilateral agreements between the United States and European countries, first of all, Poland, Romania, the Baltic States, the United Kingdom. They already now have no wish to spend their money on defense of other countries.

As for China, Trump immediately raised the issue of the necessity to liquidate trade deficit in relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The Chinese annual export to the United States amounts to USD 600 billion, and that approximately equals the Russian Federation's export to all countries of the world. The United States are trying to "stop" China by a number of preventive measures, in particular, Trump seriously increased American tariffs on USD 200 billion worth of Chinese goods.

Besides economic success, China currently makes itself known more and more as a strong military power. It started building military bases in Somalia, worked out the aircraft carrier creation program and brings it into life. The unfin-

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ished *Varyag* bought some time ago from the Ukraine, became the first Chinese aircraft carrier. It is now included in the Chinese Navy as aircraft carrier *Liaoning*. That is, China challenges the unipolar world by the very fact of its development.

With the current state of affairs, the United States are trying to limit China, restrain its activities; they are interested in creating a belt of conflicting with China states around it. The United States support claims of various countries against China, e.g. Vietnam that waged war against China in 1979, India having tense relations with the Celestial Empire because of Tibet, Japan that has not managed to improve relations with China after World War II. According to the latest data, 27 mln Soviet people and about 40 mln Chinese died in that war. Nevertheless, no one remembers that outside Asia. As a result, the Russian-Chinese border stays the most peaceful. We have managed to deal with all frictions that existed between our countries in the past.

By the way, Americans in their time also had a hand in deterioration of relations between the USSR and China; in particular, the policy pursued by Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, etc. was instrumental in that. When Nixon became the President, he undertook a number of measures directed to improvement of the United States relations with China, and that was the reason of new problems for the Soviet Union already engaged in the conflict with China because of the Party policy. Improvement of relations between China and the United States aggravated tension in this triangle.

There is an impression that Russia finds itself today in the role of China of the 1970s. The Russian Federation is not the Soviet Union that aspired to global leadership, but we want to be a sovereign country – a political subject but not an object. Because of that Russia being pushed put of Europe under any pretext, including because of the Ukrainian crisis, is more and more often pays attention to the East today.

In 2018, trade turnover between Russia and China exceeded USD 100 billion coming up to USD 108.3 billion. Export from Russia to China amounted to about USD 43 billion, that is one twelfth of all our export. It is planned to bring Russian-Chinese trade turnover up to USD 200 billion by 2020. The European Union lost the first place in the list of Russian foreign trade partners, with China taking it. What is more, Russia develops relations in the East not only with China: foreign trade figures are growing rapidly nearly with all Asia-Pacific states.

Russia does not depend on China to such a degree for it to be possible to speak about a threat to our national interests, in any case, now. However, there are arguments heard from time to time that the Chinese are cutting our forests and want water from Lake Baikal. American politicians and journalists often tell about China's wicked designs as to Siberia and the Far East but these rumors are not confirmed (in particular, ungrounded fear that the Chinese settling in Siberia and the Far East will push out the local population).

The turn to Asia is an important factor of Russian foreign policy having an impact on many sides of the life of our country.

The Eurasian Union

It is said fairly often that Russia is a Eurasian country. In 1993, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbaev

speaking at the Moscow State University suggested the idea of a Eurasian Union for the first time. In 1994, when I was a deputy to the 1st State Duma, we assembled in Almaty (then the capital of Kazakhstan) on his invitation to discuss the contours of this union. Actually, the "Eurasianism" term was coined by Russian white emigrants, who put deep historical and philosophical meaning into it. Nazarbaev's "Eurasianism" was purely geographical: Kazakhstan and Russia are located on two continents. However, the part of Russia in Europe is fairly large, while the European part of Kazakhstan is very small. However, some political scientists and philosophers, for example, A. Dugin, make the Eurasianism idea absurd: they are ready to make us change our clothes for Chinese robes and grow beards in order to emphasize that the Europe's way is not our way, they glorify paladins like Baron von Ungern, who during the Civil War referred themselves to the yellow race, etc. However, really, we are mostly Europeans, who moved from the West to the East and came up to the Pacific Ocean. Americans are also Europeans though they moved in the opposite direction, from the East to the West and came up to California.

Currently, there are hard times for the Eurasian Economic Union. After Russia turned out to be an enemy of the enlightened West, our allies in the EAEU (Belarus, Kazakhstan and others) are exerting all efforts to demonstrate that they are not Russia. I am not speaking about other countries, because their voices mean nothing but they also would not like to be caught in the crossfire. Hence all the difficulties in relations with A.G. Lukashenko. He understands that the West does not need him as an ally of Russia. The West needs Belarus like other areas neighboring Russia only after a coup there. If we allow it like it was in the Ukraine, they will elect a different leader instead of Lukashenko. On the one hand, President Lukashenko understands that, on the other hand, he tries to blackmail Russia and balance in economic relations. The same takes place in Kazakhstan.

I'll give an example. Two years ago a case was filed by a businessman against Kazakhstan in the Netherlands, and in accordance with the court ruling, the United States blocked several dozens of billions dollars – two thirds of the Kazakh Samruk-Kazyna Investment Fund. Formally, by the Netherlands court order. N. Nazarbaev met with Trump in the United States, and after the meeting, the arrest was lifted from the accounts. But 2–3 months later there was suddenly an agreement on transit of American military cargoes via Kazakhstan Caspian ports, though before that all states round the Caspian Sea had agreed that there would not be any third countries in this region. That is, the Kazakhs frankly infringed their agreements with us and other states, allowing Americans to transit illegal cargoes to Afghanistan. Americans did that on the false pretext of supplying their army in Afghanistan as, first, Trump wants to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, and second, they are supplying Afghanistan via Pakistan. All that brought about crisis in relations between Russia and Kazakhstan. We keep this difficult problem low-key but it exists and there are talks going on.

What does Kazakhstan mean for Russia? Our countries are members of the same associations. Exactly Kazakhstan was the initiator of the Eurasian integration. But all the rest is done in Kazakhstan in such a way as to, preserving rela-

tions with Russia, exclude the risk of the loss of independence and in no case provide a reason for a part of Kazakhstan where the Russian population lives (that is Eastern and Northern territories being none other than Southern Urals and Western Siberia), to find itself in the Russian Federation in this or that way.

Kazakh politicians always suspect that, though they may be hidden thoughts, because of that, developing good relations with Russia, Kazakhstan as an independent state has been building certain barriers in the course of all its short history. Russian businessmen were never allowed to develop Kazakhstan natural resources, though the country actively attracted Western, first of all American investments but restrained Russian investments. N. Nazarbaev always tried to maintain balance: political cooperation was developed with Russia but economy was the guarantee that Kazakhstan would not return to Russia – either as its part or an annex.

Such a policy brings its fruits. No sanctions are imposed on Kazakhstan, the new generation of Kazakhstan politicians is critical about a possible rapprochement with Russia, and, conversely, emphasizes their national sovereignty in every possible way. In connection with that, a number of respective decisions were taken by the supreme authorities of Kazakhstan, one of them was on transfer of the Kazakh language alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin. They have the right to such measures but this is a sign of the growing gap between Russia and Kazakhstan. This is becoming a challenge for the Russian Federation: the whole length of the Russia-Kazakhstan border is 7,500 kilometers, because of that, relations with Kazakhstan are very important for us in terms of sustainability and prospects. On the whole, relations with the CIS states are significant for us exactly because they can be used against Russia as it takes place in Georgia and the Ukraine, and now in Moldova as well.

The change of political elite in Kazakhstan may bring about serious problems: the new generation of Kazakh politicians has grown not knowing the price of their independence, they are inclined to be under a delusion as to themselves and think that it's possible to freely discuss on the Internet how they will drive out all Russians from Kazakhstan. While Nazarbaev was the President, he had enough strength and brains to keep the state of affairs under control, even with his course for building the nation-state of Kazakhstan. It is difficult to say if there will be enough strength in those who inherit from him.

When Russia clashed with the West on the issues of events in the post-Soviet space, neither Belarus nor Kazakhstan supported us. These countries do not recognize independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, they avoid these issues in order to demonstrate that they are independent, they are not like Russia. All that interferes with fulfilling integration agreements.

Russia is not striving for absorption of Belarus and Kazakhstan. The phobia of Baltic politicians is the idea that Russia intends to return Estonia and Latvia. But as Russia has never existed within such borders as now, it's important for us if borders with post-Soviet states connect us or disconnect, friendly relations between us are established or there are be sources of constant threats around Russia, charged from the outside in order to keep us "in our place".

Russia and the European Union

Currently, Russia being a European country, faces the prospect of being "pushed out" of Europe. First, the European Union is engaged in the sanction campaign against Russia. Second, European countries allowed to persuade them exactly when the United States decided to make them responsible for what was taking place in the post-Soviet space. This project was called the Eastern Partnership. In the late 1990s – early 2000s, the United States subcontracted the European Commission (with José Manuel Barroso at the head of it then) to expand NATO to the East as they had run across rejection of this expansion. And the European Union took this function upon itself but was not successful in fulfilling it. In the course of the so-called Revolution of Dignity in the Ukraine but actually coup d'état, Assistant Secretary of State at the U.S. Department of State Victoria Nuland's telephone conversations leaked and were posted. In particular, she rudely spoke about incapability of European politicians. Because of that, Americans again decided to take the initiative in their hands and now they are tying "put things in order", in particular, anti-Russian sentiments enhanced in Europe. In such an environment, Russia contacts each European country individually in order to "unbalance" a little their anti-Russian unity. This work has not brought results yet. The European Union follows in the footsteps of the United States in its foreign policy, and the Ukrainian crisis proves that.

The Ukrainian Crisis

What is the Ukrainian crisis? What is its meaning and importance for Russia in terms of geopolitics? In February 2010, V. Yanukovich was elected the President of the Ukraine, and many people in Russia had an impression that the period of alienation in relations between our countries was over. The "orange" President V. Yushchenko got only 5% of votes in the first round and disgracefully fell into oblivion. Yanukovich won in the second round over Yu. Timoshenko. I said then that if the Russian Federation managed to come to terms with the Ukraine, it would stay a European country. Russia is a European country without the Ukraine. However, if the Ukraine went on drifting to the West and not remained a buffer state for us, we would have to look to the East – Asia and China in particular. That was what anti-Russian forces in the West built their geopolitical calculations on – not to allow us restore our positions in the Ukraine and Belarus and establish close relations with the CIS states, counting on Russia having to go to the East, where its interests would sooner or later collide with the Chinese interests. The West then as always would become *Tertius gaudens* (*the third rejoicing* in Latin). What came true from this forecast? It is well known that Russia has not come to terms with the Ukraine, where they had the coup d'état, in which the West actively participated, and turned its attention to the East.

The conflict with the Ukraine is of key importance in the struggle to keep relations with Europe. In the Paris Charter adopted nearly 30 years ago, Russia was assigned the role of a country mostly subordinated to the West. The leaders of our country agreed to that after disintegration of the Soviet Union but everything changed in 2007 when V.V. Putin spoke at the Munich Security Conference. We are exerting many efforts to prove our right to take decisions.

In 2014, we had to take a choice: to react or not to the impudent challenge to Russia that was the coup in the Ukraine. Starting from my work in the 1st State Duma, I regularly reminded about the issue of Crimea and Sevastopol. However, when we tried to attract attention of the leaders of the country to these issues in the 1990, they just waved us away, accusing us of an attempt to break brotherly Russian-Ukrainian relations.

Anyway, the issue of the Crimean Peninsular coming back to Russia was not included in any plans in the 1990s. We attempted to convince the Ukrainian authorities that the Ukraine in order to hold various, heterogeneous parts in one state, should go along the same way as Russia and become a federation. There were debates in the State Duma if we should sign an agreement on friendship and cooperation with the Ukraine. The Government thought that it was necessary, and the Committee on CIS Affairs and Relations with Compatriots, which I headed, called to word some terms and conditions before signing the agreement, in which borders between states would be recognized (i.e. Crimea and Sevastopol as parts of the Ukraine).

Why did Crimea and Sevastopol turned out Ukrainian territories in the first place? Because the Soviet Union at the time of its disintegration had been made exactly like that. In 1991, Russia had agreed to all borders, and the agreement we intended to sign with the Ukraine was to confirm it. Nevertheless, we thought that the Ukraine had to sign a federative agreement with Crimea in order to differentiate authorities and responsibilities as it is done in federative states. Russia is a federative state. There are exclusive authority areas of central bodies of authority and local bodies' authority areas – republics, districts, regions as well as joint authority areas. We offered to make relations between the Ukraine and Crimea as its part legal in a similar way.

It was necessary because the Crimean people did not hide their wish to return to Russia. In January 1991, when the USSR had only several months left to exist, the first referendum took place in Crimea. People were asked: "Are you for the restoration of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic as a subject of the Union of SSR and a party to the Union agreement?" Then Crimea had the status of a region as a part of the Ukrainian SSR, people voted for the peninsular getting the republican status and for direct inclusion in the future renewed USSR according to the new Union agreement that Gorbachev tried to suggest at the time. That is, the Crimean people voted for exiting the Ukraine. As a result, the Ukraine granted them an opportunity to be called the Republic of Crimea but ignored their wish to be an independent participant of the union.

After that, the first "Russian spring" began that was stifled in 1995, when Yu.A. Meshkov was elected at the Crimea-wide elections (there were no such elections any more) the President of Crimea. He was the leader of Crimea for a year only, after that the Ukrainian authorities dismissed him, and Russia did not respond to Crimea's cries for help.

Thus, the Crimean issue has always been the delayed-action mine in Russian-Ukrainian relations. From the early 1990s and till 2014, Russian authorities tried not to aggravate relations between the two states, but Crimean residents (2 mln people) remained in the role of hostages. When it became clear in 2014 that the Ukraine was breaking off relations with Russia, mechanisms were launched that led

to Crimea being returned to the Russian Federation. The events in Donbass followed.

As a result of the said events, Russia was announced the devil incarnate because it "conquered" another state's territory and supports separatists in the neighboring country. As for "another state's territory," the Committee on CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots within the State Duma made public the respective announcement: "The Historical Truth: About the 65th Anniversary of Crimea Being Stolen from Russia and the 5th Anniversary of its Bringing Back".

Really, we did not take another state's territory. In 1954, Crimea was illegally given to the Ukrainian SSR within the Soviet Union by the decision of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, to be more exact, by N.S. Khrushchev's decision. The 65th anniversary of this shameful decision fell on April 26. We did not annex Crimea – it was stolen from us. Because of that, the words that we took something Ukrainian from the Ukraine are unfair.

Currently, those European, American and Ukrainian politicians, who are saying that Russia should refuse from supporting Donbass but at the same time do not mention Crimea, in principle are trying to find a compromise in relations with our country. People stating that Russia should not only refuse from supporting its compatriots in the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic but also return the "annexed" Crimea to the Ukraine, are bringing our relations to the dead-end. Because we will never return Crimea – this is our territory, and the historical truth is on our side. Nevertheless, this issue could have been solved differently had our neighbor's not followed the way of creating the Ukraine for Ukrainians. Any other point of view is regarded as a threat to the Ukraine, and the federative state arrangement is considered a crime. Bringing about problems in relations between Russia and the Ukraine, the interested circles in the West (and the Ukraine and Russia involuntarily helped them) thus created a serious threat for further geopolitical cooperation between Russia and the European Union. The United States are the winner in this situation, because Russia as well as the European Union are their rivals, if not political then economic. They understand that in Europe but they cannot relieve tensions in relations with Russia because they are not independent politically.

The Nuclear Threat

The time helps to replace the unipolar world with the multipolar one. The question is: to what extent is multipolarity vulnerable in case of destabilization? The generation not knowing what war is and what losing a war is (the so-called Vietnam syndrome) has entered the politics today in the United States trying to preserve their leadership. This generation thinks that a nuclear war is possible and it is possible to win it. For example, they cheer themselves up thinking that it is possible to invent miniature nuclear charges that will not allow a global nuclear war to break out, but will allow achieving dominance in local conflicts. Military and technological ingenuity is focused exactly on that – miniaturization of nuclear charges on submarines or uranium filling of tank or artillery shells.

Not only Russian but also American experts, who remember the times when the countries were for disarmament

ment, speak about the danger of this approach. Richard Burt, who was the head of the American delegation at the talks when the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) was discussed, is worried that people not understanding that there should be no nuclear war, have come to power in the United States. They suppose that it is possible to wage it and probable that the United States will win it as America has created the insurmountable nuclear-missile shield, etc. But this is an illusion. Neither Russia nor the United States have anti-missile defense systems that could prevent a nuclear catastrophe. The previous time when Americans had such fantasies was during R. Reagan's presidency (in the latter period of the Soviet Union). He announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (the main purpose of that program was creation of a space shield that could make America invincible). Currently, experts understand that it is impossible to create a shield protecting from a nuclear strike.

Currently, there is a threat brought about by the United States withdrawal from the Treaty on Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems, Treaty on the Elimination of Medium- and Short-Range Missiles and related to the attempts of the United States to equip Poland, Romania and other countries located close to Russia, with missiles that can quickly reach the territory of our country. The problem is that placing missiles close to our borders does not help to disturb the existing parity and nuclear potential but cuts the time for decision-taking. The flight time to our territory is only 5–7 minutes if missiles are placed where planned. It means that the decision on a retaliatory strike will be taken not by a man but by a computer. We are becoming hostages of machinery, i.e. humans are excluded from the decision-taking process as to the humankind survival. The so-called Dead Hand system provides for a retaliatory nuclear strike in case the top leaders of the country die, and that is a threat not only for us but for all the rest as well.

Currently, Russia is interested in agreements to be observed and talks on disarmament and arms race restraints. However, we do not see the same striving on the part of the United States. In October 2018, Russia officially addressed the United States of America to sign a declaration: the two leading nuclear powers, the Russian Federation and the United States, were to confirm the impossibility to win a nuclear war as well as impossibility of a nuclear war as such. Americans refused to do it.

Russia and NATO

On April 15, 2019, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation announced that contacts between the Russian Federation and NATO were suspended. It's another step certifying that there is no dialogue. Russia in its time went too far in contacts with NATO. In 1995, the West promoted the idea of NATO expansion to the East. In order for us not to be against it, there was a program for military cooperation with NATO, The Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. At that time, there were parliamentary hearings in the State Duma on my initiative, on the issue, whether Russia should participate in this program. The conclusion was unambiguous: this program is a Trojan horse let loose in the post-Soviet space, and if we sign it, we will thus give our neighbors – independent CIS states – a signal to signs agreements with NATO on partnership for peace on the globe. After that our relations with these coun-

tries will depend on NATO. At the time, the leaders of our country did not pay attention to our conclusions, and Russia signed the cooperation program. Georgia, Armenia and other countries were engaged in this program, and they started seriously developing their relations with NATO. If relations between the Russian Federation and NATO stayed at the level of mutual politeness, friendly visits, they started testing mechanisms, training personnel, etc. By now, the pendulum has swung more than required, i.e. Russia and NATO are already having so different opinions and do not maintain relations that they officially recognized it. Currently, all ties are fully broken – two ships are going in different directions, without paying attention to each other. This is not very good because even in the period of Soviet-American confrontation there were mechanisms to share opinions and for consultations, there was the Warsaw Pact. There is nothing now, and that creates risks for Russia. When speaking convincingly and fighting for our interests, we should not forget that we have to find common ground.

The Role of Contemporary International Institutions

International institutions established including on the initiative of the West such as WTO and many others, are today disparagingly criticized by the Western leader – the United States of America. This is the Trump administration's policy. The opposition, mostly Democrats, would like to return to the former system of the United States dominance, when their country as a good hegemonic state stuck to the rules of the game and manipulated all with the help of international institutions. Trump, who has become the leader of protesting white America against the establishment in Washington, New York and other cities, destroys this approach, and that brings conflicts in the American political system up to the extreme.

Recently, the book *Fear: Trump in the White House* by the well-known American journalist Bob Woodward was published in Russian. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were authors of shocking exposures at the time of the Watergate scandal that led to resignation of President Nixon. 16 books out of 18 written by Woodward became national bestsellers. He is not a Trump follower but he wrote a book about Trump in power. There is a lot of precise information and understanding how this administration really works. Trump's image is created as a destroyer of any order because of his experience as a businessman: before making friends he should necessarily attack someone. Trump is proud of his relations with Xi Jinping but at the same time regular upheavals in American-Chinese relations do not suit him. There is now a struggle that is not made public going on in the top Chinese authorities between those who think that it is possible to come to agreements with America (closest advisors of Xi Jinping) and those who think it impossible to come to agreements with the United States because development of China is the sentence to Chinese-American relations.

Currently, Russia is trying to emphasize the important role of international institutions (United Nations, etc.) at every level. Sometimes international institutions are transformed – it happened to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons: its Charter was rewritten, and now all decisions are taken by the staff and the stands of

other countries are not taken into account. Because of that, I see no prospects for coming to global agreements in the near future.

Russia in the Contemporary World

While the United States are losing their leadership positions (for economic and other reasons) with China on their heels and already outrunning them as a background, confrontation is increasing and there are risks originating along the perimeter of the Russian Federation. Russia is trying to fight that and demonstrates its military capabilities. Doubts that our country can undertake something at all are mostly related to weakness of Russian economy. Western analytics and politicians ignore relations with Russia and think that weakness of our economy will not allow us to compete with them.

Gross domestic product of the Russian Federation amounts to USD 1.5 trillion and equals GDP of the New York state, i.e. Russian GDP is 1/10 of U.S. GDP, or 3.3% of global GDP. It seems to the United States that it is enough to ignore ambitions and interests of Russia. And we're trying to prove to them (and, by the way, do it fairly convincingly) that we're able to compete not only in the Ukraine but also in Syria and other parts of the globe.

Even Russia's love to China is only an attempt to show the United States that if they behave like that, we will address China. However, there are many people who would like to return relations with the United States to the normal course. I think that Russia should not be a junior partner of either the United States or China. This point of view is conceptually presented by V. Surkov in his article *Loneliness of a Half-breed*.

What course should the world take? Will precariousness be aggravated in future? There has never been such definiteness in relations of the two countries, the Russian Federation and the United States: we are sure that the United States consider Russia, China and Iran their enemies. It turned out in the 1990s that Russia was in ruins and it could be not paid attention to: they talked to us condescendingly, looked at us like yesterday's partners who cannot do anything.

Today, Russia it already putting the West on its guard and makes it uneasy. The question is, what it will lead to? Can we respond to challenges, be competitive, solve our domestic problems that unfortunately only increase in Russia?

According to statistics, Russians' standard of living is falling, e.g. in comparison with 2018, it fell by 2.3%. The protest potential is increasing not only in the capital city but in provinces as well. Today, people are not ready to suffer and present claims in connection with everything they do not like. E.g. there has always been the garbage issue but it has never been so drastic: people demand to close all refuse dumps. Authorities should take respective decisions. Only 4% of all garbage is processed in Russia, and all the rest is accumulated by decades. This is one of the urgent problems today because of the garbage reform underway. The Government shifts the material aspect of these issues on the shoulders of the people by increasing tariffs for taking out garbage. All that creates reasons for protests.

In my opinion, there were serious blunders in the pension reform. The pension reform is inevitable but in order for the people to support it, authorities should have demonstrated that they want to distribute the tax burden between all justly and rightfully: income tax should be proportional. Unfortunately, we still have not managed to convince the President and the Government to do that. The President thinks that there should be constant rules of the game and it's inadmissible to increase taxes on entrepreneurs as they will respond by closing their facilities and taking money out of the country. And our people think differently: if the authorities demand something, all citizens should be taxed in favors of the state proportionally to their capabilities. We have not come to such understanding yet. We approved the Government's report yet another time, but we are not satisfied with it, because there is no real understanding of the depth of problems in it – the gap between the people and the Government is expanding more and more.

Hence the growth of the protest potential capable to interfere with Russia's return to the list of great powers. All that is the reason for serious thoughts.