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THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF HISTORY AND THE NEW “DECLINE OF THE WEST”

The explosive in its quickness, scales and destructive force crash of the relations between Russia on the one hand, and the Ukraine and the West on the other hand, their rapid transfer from toughening rivalry to the large-scale heated up stage of the confrontation, were not widely forecasted. The reputation of Russia in foreign policy that absorbed the Soviet experience to a large extent, has been built since the early 1990s basing on the principles of careful observance of the international law, fighting against its revision and bypassing the institution of the UN Security Council as

the head international judge for the issues of war and peace. In the eyes of the biggest part of the international community, Russia in case of crises related to regional conflicts in Yugoslavia and Iraq, Libya and Syria, Yemen and even Georgia not only had a convincing stand legally but also had moral advantages in comparison with those who staked on the “hard power” bypassing the UN.⁴ However, the stake of Russia’s geopolitical rivals on the crash of the system of checks and balances, which the today’s world inherited from the Cold War, led during the recent decades to the situation when Moscow had to pass over from the “acts of defense” of diplomatic and political character to preemptive steps, including military and technical.

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Notwithstanding the said crash, it is not self-evident that exactly the year of 2022 became the trend-setting year in transfer from one model of international relations to another one, the future results of such a transfer are not evident either. Do we witness the birth of a new world, the premonitory signs of which are the Ukrainian crisis and the dramatically increasing rivalry between China and America, or are these phenomena in-built in the logic of the events that have been developing for a long time already? There is also a point of view according to which the ongoing processes in the contemporary world order, notwithstanding all their dramatic character, do not lead to its radical transformation and total collapse, but are another variant of redistribution of the share of various centers of influence, and this point of view has the right to exist. This redistribution again takes place

⁴ См.: Громыко А. А. Куда идет мир? Летопись грандиозной трансформации // Современная Европа. 2023. № 2 (116). С. 181.

with the trans-border use of force in all its manifestations. In this case we are not dealing with something principally new in the chronicle of international relations, but more likely with putting the eternal questions about the sources of wars and conflicts: the opposite perceptions of the idea of “safety and security”, consequences of technical innovations in the art of war, different interpretations of the international law, disputes over territories, etc.¹

Various geopolitical centers of force made many attempts after the disintegration of the USSR probing for a renewed framework of the world order: to form the “Common European home”, the system of equal and indivisible security; create the American unipolar world instead of the bipolar one; push out the United States and the superiority of the “hard power” together with them from the position of the leading center of force in favor of the European Union and the “soft power” respectively: establish the duumvirate “Chimerica” as a kind of reminiscence of the post-Napoleon “concert of powers”. All this search developed within the main course of the global restructuring – from the bloc confrontation of two superpowers during the Cold War to polycentrism of international relations. The current stage of acute confrontation is fighting for redistribution of power in the field of international relations for the decades to come.

At the same time, it is difficult not to agree that the events of the 2020s are being the most dramatic part of the post-Soviet transformation period. But their in-building in the context of post-Soviet history allows, first, to evaluate them and all their causal links, and, second, not get into the trap of “uniqueness” of these or those phenomena. Following this line of argument, the category of the cyclical nature of history suggests itself, which surely can’t be reduced to stereotypes. There were many force redistribution cycles in international relations, but the way they took place and their results were always unique. The current redistribution cycle is another one in its line, but we do not know what to expect “at the exit”. The stereotypes of the Cold War or bipolarity characteristic of the second half of the 20th century can hardly be applied to this stage of history.

Each epoch needs its own security doctrine in order to provide the maximally long pause of peaceful cooperation or peaceful co-existence between outbursts of violence. Notwithstanding the age-long warnings of the founders and participants of the Pugwash Conferences on Science as well as a no small number of their modern followers (e. g., The Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group², The Nuclear Threat Initiative³), it can’t be excluded that the doctrine

of nuclear deterrence will stop functioning in its former version as a result of the further development of technologies. The Ukrainian crisis and the modern version of proxy wars raise this question acutely.⁴ The renewed security doctrine for Europe is still to be worked out.

The definite, unambiguous answer to the question as to where we are – at the turn of epochs or going through another stage of Russia’s looking for its place in the world – will not be given soon. The most acute periods of conflicts, heated up stages of confrontation have always been not the best time in history to forecast the future. It is still not evident to what the current events will lead to – the new “Westphalia”, “Vienna” or “Yalta”, or something more mundane. How will the trajectory of development of the antagonistic states be corrected or change? Which of them are to expect an ascent, which are to weaken, which are to expect stagnation? How will the countries of the Global South use it? There are more questions than answers.

The principle of historical optimism is an important aid for the modern international analytics. From its point of view, it is required to study the past to oppose the “catastrophic alarmism”. It is well-known that there were periods of self-destruction but also the periods of common sense and cooperation in the history of the European civilization. Europe became the epicenter of world wars twice notwithstanding all the legacy of the periods of Humanism and Enlightenment. Today, Europe is again in the center of destructive processes. The system of control over armaments is nearly destroyed, the measures of trust and security jointly worked out in the past do not work anymore. At the same time, in the course of its history Europe demonstrated and not once its ability to mutual reconciliation, formation of effective mechanisms for cooperation, adaptation to large-scale regional and global challenges. The Russian factor has always played one of the key roles in the manifestation of this ability.

Inability of Europe in the post-Soviet period to develop immunity against new extremely dangerous internal contradictions, against inclination to rely on some external and not its own strategic thought, again demonstrates the lack of prospects for the Eurocentrism resurrection course. The opinion that the decline of the role of Europe in world politics has been seen from the end of World War I seems well-grounded.⁵ “The Decline of the West” as interpreted by O. Spengler was denied by the course of events and not once, but the Eurocentric axis of the world politics is really the legacy of a faraway past.

¹ Громыко А. А. *Op. cit.* С. 181–182.

² Advancing Global Nuclear “Fail-Safe” // European Leadership Network. URL: https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/EASLG-Statement_GNFS_FINAL.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023); Supports Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States Affirming: “A Nuclear War Cannot be Won and Must Never be Fought” // European Leadership Network. URL: <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/group-statement/euro-atlantic-security-leadership-group-easlg-supports-joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-the-five-nuclear-weapon-states-affirming-a-war-cannot-be-won-and-must-never-be-fought/> (accessed: 15.05.2023).

³ Nuclear // NTI : [website]. URL: <https://www.nti.org/area/nuclear/> (accessed: 15.05.2023).

⁴ Громыко А. А. *Op. cit.* С. 183.

⁵ Барановский В. Г. *Международный ландшафт: эпоха перемен. Избранная аналитика.* М. : Весь мир, 2021. С. 309.