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Donald Trump and the Evolving U.S.-Russia Relationship

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Abstract

Donald Trump came to the White House with a desire to adjust U.S. foreign policy to the ongoing shifts in the international system. As a hardcore realist, he wanted to improve U.S.-Russia relations, perceiving the latter as an important counterweight to quickly-growing China and a potential partner in dealing with religious fundamentalism. Nevertheless, of all Trump's policy initiatives, this one has encountered the most resistance from entrenched American elites. Combined with massive propaganda campaign alleging Russian interference in the U.S. elections (that seems to target Trump no less than Russia), the President's opponents are pursuing an agenda that will have long-term consequences for both countries. The elite's refusal to recognize the scale and the potential consequences of the ongoing world power shifts and the consistent exaggeration of both the RF's power capabilities and the seriousness of its threat to Western interests create a distorted virtual reality, handicapping the Global North's ability to deal with newly emerging threats. These policies incrementally push Russia toward China, strengthen the hawks within Putin's inner circle, and lead to further conservative shifts in his foreign and domestic policies.

Keywords

U.S.-Russia relations, Eurocentric system, Global North, unimultipolar system, power politics.

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Introduction

The political crises evolving in Ukraine, East Asia, and the Middle East are just some of the testimonies to the qualitatively new, deep and rapid geopolitical shifts taking place within the international system. The Europeans' panicked reaction to the recent refugee flow from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); the quickly growing influence of extreme right populist political movements and parties; the conservative shifts in the policies of a number of governments, including many democratically elected ones; the conversion of some subversive international nongovernmental organizations (including openly terrorist ones such as al-Qaeda and DAESH) into world-scale political players, attempting to build their own protostate structures; as well as the unexpected consequences of the "colour revolutions" in the Middle East and the post-Soviet region, as well as some other political experiments of recent years, pose quite interesting and significant challenges for the international community. These challenges, taking place alongside the quickly growing influence of China and India and the formation and rapid functional expansion of such non-Western intergovernmental organizations as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and BRICS, represent just some of the links in a chain of events, marking the global shift of the world economic and political power centres from the North Atlantic to the Pacific Basin.

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later rejected by Donald Trump. The inconsistent and conceptually flawed policies of the Bush and Obama administrations in the Middle East along with Russia's increasing activism in that region have led to numerous claims that the world is witnessing an evolving crisis of the unipolar (or, in Samuel

Huntington's words, unimultipolar¹) system that was based on the U.S. and Global North monopoly and emerged with the end of the Cold War and the USSR's dissolution in December 1991.

The Collapse of the Bipolar System and its Consequences

The 1991 fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War and the bloc system resulted in some very serious and quite unexpected changes in the structure and the functioning of the world economic and political systems. First of all, the Second, Communist World has essentially collapsed, with its members joining the ranks of either the First (Capitalist) or the Third (Developing, post-Colonial) Worlds, which have evolved into the Global North and the Global South.

Second, within this new configuration, the Global South has turned out to be more vulnerable than it was during the Third World era: its members lost their ability to balance between the two major blocs and are facing now the monopolistic and quite monolithic Global North that is dictating the rules of the game.

Third, even though in most (though not all) cases, the major powers are not interested anymore in sponsoring the conflicts in the Global South, they frequently do not strive to stop such conflicts if they do not carry the threat of escalation or territorial expansion, or are located in regions that have no particular resource or strategic importance for them. The drastic contrast between the Western reaction to the simultaneous bloody ethnic and religious conflicts in the European Balkan states and Africa's Rwanda in the mid-1990s serves as a shocking illustration of this new post-Cold War geopolitical reality.

As a result, 'zones of hopelessness' are forming. Lacking adequate resources and infrastructure, and politically unstable, these regions thus receive neither state nor private external investments. Such zones are becoming breeding grounds for poverty, political extremism, military conflicts, and organized crime (including piracy and various types of trafficking), as well as source regions for mass refugee and migration flows. Many of these zones are also located in environmental risk zones – a fact that can further worsen the situation long-term by further stimulating large-scale emigration.

Deep changes have also occurred in the self-perception and policies of the Global North. The collapse of the Soviet Union was viewed there not just

as the West's political victory – it started to be considered as a confirmation of the First World's moral righteousness and the superiority of its economic and political model, perceived since then as the only right and possible one – and, following Francis Fukuyama's famous statement, discussion of 'the end of history' started yet again.² Respectively, the acceptance of the West's model became the necessary precondition for the admittance of Global South countries into the 'civilized' club. Again, as it happened already in 1492 (the starting point of European colonialism and worldwide domination) and 1878 (the Congress of Berlin's declaration of Western entitlement to the "uncivilized" territories), the former West has unilaterally taken upon itself the 'civilizing' mission.

In the economic sphere, this trend was expressed through the proliferation of the Globalization concept – essentially Westernization – the formation of the world economic system on the basis of the Liberal International Economic Order, the Bretton Woods model (in its revised, post-1971 form), and the Washington consensus. The IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO (formed on the basis of GATT) memberships have expanded drastically and have become essentially a necessary requirement for a state's international legitimization. Meanwhile, membership in these organizations required the introduction of radical market reforms and the opening up of their (frequently weak) national economies to international competition. Essentially, this meant the introduction of new limits on state sovereignty.

Even more radical changes were taking place in the political sphere. Starting with George H.W. Bush's New World Order doctrine, proclaimed during the 1990-91 'Desert Storm' operation in Kuwait, every American administration has declared the Western political model's universal applicability and claimed the right of the Global North to arbitrarily limit or completely reject the sovereign rights of 'faulty' states. The system that was formed at that time relied on the erosion of state sovereignty, the expansion of supranational governing mechanisms, and the further growth of the Global North's power. In his speech to the joint session of Congress in the wake of the military operation in Kuwait, President Bush stated:

We stand today at a unique and extraordinary moment. The crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation.

Out of these troubled times... a new world order... can emerge: a new era – freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony. A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavor. Today that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak... America and the world must support the rule of law – and we will. America and the world must stand up to aggression – and we will. And one thing more: In the pursuit of these goals America will not be intimidated... Vital issues of principle are at stake... Vital economic interests are at risk as well... Recent events have surely proven that there is no substitute for American leadership. In the face of tyranny, let no one doubt American credibility and reliability. Let no one doubt our staying power.³

Under Bill Clinton, this trend was further expressed in the proclamation of the existence of universal human rights and common human values (which happened to be taken, nevertheless, exclusively from the Western conceptual vocabulary) and the claim that the U.S. would consider human rights violations in other countries as a matter of its strategic interest. This claim implied the right of the U.S. to arbitrarily limit or completely deny other countries' sovereign rights, as was done during the military operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Somalia. The same approach would be used to impose economic and other sanctions on states whose internal policies for various reasons did not correspond to U.S. wishes – in particular, Belarus, Venezuela, Serbia, Cuba, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, North Korea, Syria, Iran, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, and later, Russia, Uganda, and a number of other states.

Under George W. Bush, the U.S., relying now on the Democratic Peace doctrine, started to pursue policies of pre-emptive strikes, the selective forceful removal of authoritarian regimes deemed to be out of favour, followed by

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large-scale neoconservative political engineering – the imposition on the defeated and occupied countries of regimes that were presumably friendly to the West: peaceful, democratic, and pro-market.

Meanwhile, the political experiments in Afghanistan and Iraq, and then, in Libya, Egypt, and a number of other countries demonstrated the dogmatic character of this approach and the low reliability of its final outcomes: the refusal to take into account historical, religious, national, cultural, tribal, and other factors simultaneously

with the destruction of the traditional political, and not infrequently, civilizational structures has led to some truly catastrophic consequences. Of special importance was the policy of the Colour Revolutions, designed to overthrow unwelcome regimes through the sponsorship of militant opposition groups under the formal neutrality and non-interference of the Western governments. The complete state collapse in Libya and Somalia; the rapid destruction of state structures in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine; the crises in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen; and the civil war in Syria illustrate the danger and the unpredictable character of such policies.

Although President Barack Obama offered a very different face and image of the U.S. to the world, his policies, albeit with a lesser degree of enthusiasm, generally continued those initiated by the Clinton and Bush administrations. Obama's policies, meanwhile, had an additional twist, one that involved an attempt to significantly change the power balance in the Middle East. This strategy included the partial withdrawal of U.S. support for Israel and an attempt to return to the U.S. balancing act between the Sunni Arab regimes (first of all, Saudi Arabia) and the Shia Iran, that had been characteristic of U.S. policies in the region before 1979. Nevertheless, the Obama administration's incrementally increasing involvement in the conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine essentially had consequences similar to the previous Clinton and Bush administrations' policies.

In a similar fashion, the current worsening of U.S.-Russian relations that was grossly aggravated by allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S.

election, initiated by Hillary Clinton during her failed Presidential campaign, has had a serious negative impact both on U.S.-Russian relations and on Russian foreign and domestic policies. In February 2018, in the wake of the new Russian sanctions announcement, House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan stated:

...Russians engaged in a sinister and systematic attack on our political system. It was a conspiracy to subvert the process, and take aim at democracy itself. Today's announcement underscores why we need to follow the facts and work to protect the integrity of future elections.⁴

Ironically, among the unexpected results of this campaign were the emergence in the West of Vladimir Putin's public image as a Superman Almighty, Russia's increasing orientation towards China, the growth of anti-American and Western feelings among the Russian population, and the strengthening of the hawks' positions within Putin's inner circle and the Russian political establishment in general. Such recent actions as the International Olympic Committee's decision to ban the Russian state and a large number of Russian athletes from the 2018 Winter Olympic Games (eagerly characterized by Putin as "totally orchestrated and politically motivated"),⁵ the expulsion of Russian diplomats, and the official labelling of the state-funded Russia Today TV channel and Sputnik news agency as foreign agents in the U.S. immediately led to reciprocal moves by the Russian government and allowed it to rally Russian public opinion, label as foreign agents the Voice of America and Radio Liberty news outlets, and introduce bans on numerous internet sites – right at the time when Putin was preparing to run his fourth presidential campaign.

Meanwhile, the very emergence of the figure of Donald Trump serves as an important symbol of the erosion of the West-dominant world system that was predicted (or rather desired) by many academics and political leaders at the start of the current century. Characteristically, Putin claimed in his October 2015 speech at the 70th UN General Assembly meeting that:

We all know that after the end of the Cold War, the world was left with one center of dominance, and those who found themselves at the top of the pyramid were tempted to think that, since they are so powerful and exceptional, they know best what needs to be done... [Their actions] may result in the collapse

of the entire architecture of international relations, and then indeed there will be no rules left except for the rule of force. The world will be dominated by selfishness rather than collective effort, by dictate rather than equality and liberty, and instead of truly independent states we will have protectorates controlled from the outside.⁶

This perception of the evolving world power structure along with Russia's expanding military and economic capabilities, its growing irritation with the perceived violations by the West of the 1990s agreements and mutual understandings, including the EU and NATO's eastward expansion and alleged Western interference in the internal affairs of Russia and other post-Communist states (especially the Colour Revolutions in that region, viewed in Russia as its zone of traditional influence) became the foundations of Putin's foreign and domestic policies that turned out to be especially clearly visible during his third presidential term (2012-18).

Donald Trump's Foreign Policy: Prospects for a Change

The emergence of Donald Trump as a presidential contender in 2015 and his consequent victory in the 2016 U.S. elections are symbolic of the seriousness of the challenges (both internal and external) that the U.S. currently faces. Thus the study of the current U.S. policy towards Russia cannot be limited

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to a discussion of Donald Trump's unorthodox political views and behaviour, and should instead be based on an analysis of the countries' bilateral relations history, ongoing geopolitical changes, and Trump's wider strategy of

dealing with the erosion of the U.S. monopoly in the world political system. In contrast to most members of the U.S. political establishment, including Hillary Clinton and such dogmatic Cold War warriors as John McCain, Lindsay Graham, Bob Porter, or Marco Rubio, Trump and his senior political advisor (until August 2017) Stephen Bannon were willing to accept the notion that the world was quickly changing and that the U.S. had to adjust its foreign policies to the new reality and build a new strategy. In particular, Trump (in a

sharp contrast to the expansionist neoliberal Hillary Clinton) was not, at least initially, interested in getting involved in new military adventures abroad and would have preferred the U.S. to look increasingly inwards. Thus, the Trump phenomenon represents an attempt to grasp the evolving international order and adjust the goals and methods of U.S. foreign policy to the new political reality. Nevertheless, Trump's policies are encountering strong resistance from most of the traditional American elites.

The first steps by the Trump administration indicated a sincere attempt at a cardinal revision of U.S. geopolitical priorities: declaring the "America First" principle, espousing a return to a traditional understanding of the state sovereignty concept, proposing a less interventionist and ideologically motivated military policy, recognizing the ongoing geopolitical shift towards the Pacific region, and viewing China as the major and quickly growing political, economic, and military threat to the U.S. Trump (along with Bannon and such members of his original team as Sebastian Gorka and the short-term National Security Advisor Michael Flynn) insisted on the revolutionary modification of U.S. foreign policy goals, including deemphasizing the significance of NATO and Europe in general and treating Russia as a counterweight to China and a potential U.S. ally both in East Asia and in the Middle East. In particular, Steve Bannon claimed that:

The economic war with China is everything. And we have to be maniacally focused on that. If we continue to lose it, we're five years away, I think, ten years at the most, of hitting an inflection point from which we'll never be able to recover... One of us is going to be a hegemon in 25 or 30 years and it's gonna be them if we go down this path.⁷

As a businessman, Trump was looking first of all at the contemporary economic realities: at the beginning of 2016, the U.S. accounted for 24.32% of the world GDP; China, for 14.84%; while Russia, just for 1.8%. Even more important were the economic projections of that time, indicating that due to their faster rates of economic growth (respectively 6.7% and 6.6% in 2016 compared to the U.S.' 1.6%), the size of both China's and India's economies could exceed that of the U.S. within the first half of the current century.⁸ In one of his 2016 interviews, while running for office, Trump claimed:

The Soviet Union doesn't exist now it's Russia, which is not the same size, in theory not the same power... The point is the world is a much different place right now. And today all you have to do is read and see the world is, the big threat would seem to be based on terror... I think, probably a new institution maybe would be better for that than using NATO, which was not meant for that. And it's become very bureaucratic, extremely expensive and maybe is not flexible enough to go after terror. Terror is very much different than what NATO was set up for... I'll tell you the problems I have with NATO. No. 1, we pay far too much... Today, it has to be changed. It has to be changed to include terror. It has to be changed from the standpoint of cost because the U.S. bears far too much of the cost of NATO.⁹

Donald Trump's advisors also considered the globalization system, incrementally built in the initial post-Cold War period on the basis of such mechanisms as the World Trade Organization and designed to create economic advantages for the largest and (presumed at that time to be the) most effective U.S. economy, to be now more of a liability than an advantage for the U.S. In Trump's view, at present, this system benefits China instead of the U.S., and should be destroyed or at least modified significantly. This has further reinforced his desire to take steps aimed at weakening China (including the improvement of U.S.-Russia relations), and protecting the American industry and agriculture sectors from what he views as unfair competition, by rebuilding economic protectionist barriers, stopping the undocumented immigration of low-skilled workers (the number of undocumented migrants is estimated currently at around 11 million),¹⁰ eliminating the diversity immigration lottery, and cutting the scale of both family-based migration and refugee flow.

Clearly, the President is a hardcore realist, putting power considerations far above ideological or moral ones. Trump appreciates the scope of the structural changes taking place within the international system and sees China, not Russia, as the main U.S. rival and threat to American strategic interests. At the same time, declining Europe (especially the economically weaker and politically less stable former Communist states of Eastern Europe and most of the former Soviet republics) is perceived as a liability requiring huge expenditures and strategic guarantees on the U.S. part and, from Trump's perspective, unable to offer anything valuable in exchange. This is especially

important because Europe is no longer viewed as the ideological battlefield in the struggle against Russia, but rather as a political periphery. Thus the Europeans are being told to at least fulfil their legal obligations, contained in the NATO Charter, and to pay for their own defence. Indeed, in 2015, the U.S. spent 3.6% of its GDP on defence – the highest ratio of any NATO member (and by far, the highest total military budget in the world). That is almost double the target of 2% of GDP to which NATO members had all agreed in 2006. Meanwhile, by 2015, only five other NATO members had reached this threshold; in 2016, just four.¹¹ Along with the U.S., these were the United Kingdom, Greece, Estonia, and Poland.¹²

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Even more so, as both a political realist and a businessman, Trump is much less inclined than conventional politicians and ideologues to give large amounts of money or any political or military guarantees to the corrupt and unstable political regimes outside NATO. This creates significant problems for Eastern Europe and especially for Ukraine and Georgia, considering the developments in those countries over the last ten years. Simultaneously, this approach essentially undermines or completely eliminates some of the major areas of strategic and ideological contention between the U.S. and Russia.

Meanwhile, Trump's original conceptual design went even further, and was based on a willingness to repeat the Nixon/Kissinger political experiment of the 1970s, when the U.S. started to play the "Chinese card" against the USSR, this time playing Russia against China. In addition, he considered an active intelligence interaction and information exchange between the U.S. and Russia as the necessary precondition for any success in fighting DAESH and fundamentalism in general. In this sense, he viewed Obama's hostile policies towards both Russia and Israel as a total strategic failure.

Nevertheless, the developments of the first year of Trump's presidency, including the replacement of Michael Flynn by Herbert McMaster as National Security Advisor, the forcing out of Stephen Bannon and Sebastian Gorka, the sabotage of the White House initiatives in Congress, the Mueller investigation, and the all-out anti-Trump propaganda campaign, conducted

by the elite media, have led to changes in both the tone of the White House statements about Russia and in its practical actions. Indicative in this sense were the new sanctions, introduced or at least declared against Russia, the decision to sell lethal weapons to Ukraine on a limited scale, and the change in the tone regarding Russia, made in the President's State of the Union address to Congress on January 30, 2018:

Around the world, we face rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals like China and Russia that challenge our interests, our economy, and our values. In confronting these dangers, we know that weakness is the surest path to conflict, and unmatched power is the surest means of our defense.¹³

Still, an analysis of the evolution of the sanctions regime indicates that Trump, as a political realist and a businessman, is much more interested in the economic aspects of sanctions; understanding that their removal is unrealistic under the current circumstances, the President is trying to achieve his own goals, aiming at the weakening of the competitors to American businesses. Thus, the current sanctions target Russia's oil, gas, and extractive industries, the heavy machine-building and military-industrial complex, and the financial sector. Characteristically, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert stated in February 2018:

...this legislation and its implementation are deterring Russian defense sales. Since the enactment of the... legislation, we estimate that foreign governments have abandoned planned or announced purchases of several billion dollars in Russian defense acquisitions.¹⁴

Ironically, this State Department official added that there was no need for new sanctions "because the legislation is, in fact, serving as a deterrent," thus indicating once again that the economic aspects of sanctions are more important for Trump's administration than the purely political ones. This approach causes deep aversion on the part of the established political elites.¹⁵ In particular, Democratic Senator Chris Coons from Illinois, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, stated recently that "the president has not used tools the Senate gave him, [by the vote of] 98 to 2, to send a clear and unmistakable sign to Vladimir Putin and Russia" about the consequences of meddling in other countries' elections, with the administration being in no hurry to implement many of the envisioned sanctions.¹⁶

Trump's emphasis is on targeted, smart sanctions, oriented against Russia's political and business elites, particularly those belonging to Putin's inner circle. The sanction listing, published in January 2018, includes 210 Russian political and business elite representatives, among whom are all the members of the RF federal government and all Russian dollar billionaires.

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It seems that instead of the usual attempts to weaken the country's economy and create problems for the population in general, provoking public disobedience, the sanctions' goal now is to create feelings of instability and unpredictability specifically among the elites, stimulating their desire to either get rid of Putin or at least pressure him to soften his stance towards the West and allow some degree of liberalization within the country.¹⁷

Nevertheless, even these changes hardly prove the revision of Trump's general strategic plans in regard to Russia – they seem to be rather a tactical retreat in the face of strong resistance to his policies by the American elites. Meanwhile, the implementation of the revolutionary changes suggested by Trump initially would require some drastic alterations of the U.S. foreign policy and security strategy and tactics as well as significant personnel changes – people with a Cold War mentality will probably never be willing or able to accept the new conceptual approach.

Both Trump's strategy and tactics bring with them a number of serious challenges. First, it seems clear that Trump, viewing China as the major threat to U.S. interests, intends to destroy or at least significantly weaken those global institutions (such as the WTO and the regional trade agreements, including those that do not include China, for instance, NAFTA) that were formed or expanded during the last twenty-five years. In his view, these agreements and structures, designed initially to give advantage to the U.S., at present favour China and a number of other countries. He also seems to be willing to raise tensions with China in order to block its further advancement through some kind of a new "containment" policy. This seems to be a very risky strategy that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy by provoking an angry Chinese reaction. The new flexing of American muscles in East Asia has already resulted in a series of crises in U.S. relations with the nuclear North Korea – a development not only dangerous in itself but also likely to create new tensions in U.S. relations with neighbouring China and Russia.

Trump's Challenges

Ultimately, it is not clear to what extent the globalization process can be reversed, stopped, or even slowed down, or what the consequences of such attempts could be for the U.S. and the world economy.

Second, Trump's willingness to "contain" Iran could lead to a sharp increase in tensions with that country and in that region in general – ironically in a situation in which both states face a common threat in Sunni religious fundamentalism and could cooperate in its containment. In this sense, Trump's policy can further complicate U.S. relations with Russia and lead to the escalation of the conflict in Syria.

Third, Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions, along with his promised attempts to renegotiate NAFTA and other agreements, could lead to a serious worsening of U.S. relations with Latin America (first of all, Mexico), increase anti-American sentiments in the Western hemisphere, and have considerable economic consequences. Meanwhile, Latin America represents an important part of the very Pacific region that is becoming the centre of the world power. These actions create an opening for Russia, and, especially, China, for political, economic, and military expansion in Latin America.

Fourth, Trump's anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric, including the recent attempts to either cancel or tighten the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) will also weaken the U.S. position on the world-qualified labour and international education markets, in particular by diverting the flow of skilled, educational, and investment migrants from Muslim and Hispanic states to other countries, further provoking anti-American sentiments abroad, weakening the U.S.'s "soft power" capabilities, and creating new security threats, while simultaneously leading to the proliferation of xenophobia in the U.S.

Fifth, seeking the support of the military and trying to boost economic growth on the basis of government-generated demand, Trump is aggressively expanding the military budget. The expected \$716 billion figure for 2019 would increase Pentagon spending by more than 7% over the 2018 budget, and by more than 13%, over 2017, when the U.S. spent about \$634 billion on defence.¹⁸ This action will most probably provoke suspicion and similar moves on the part of major military rivals, first of all, China and Russia.

Finally, whatever Trump's strategic plans are, his operational codes are still a big unknown; specifically, how will he act under crisis conditions? The President intends to improve U.S. relations with Russia and to avoid any further U.S. involvement in military operations abroad. Both of those initiatives are wise. Still, the question is – what would happen if a serious conflict of interests – either national or personal – were to emerge, and it became an issue of pride (say, an assassination of a U.S. official abroad)? Both Trump and Putin are strong-willed, proud and stubborn political realists – and while they could probably understand each other and find a compromise behind closed doors, their inclination toward grandstanding in times of crisis could lead to a dangerous escalation of tensions.

And thus the question remains: does the President have adequate diplomatic and tactical skills in the foreign policy domain and will he be able to overcome the ever-increasing resistance to his reform proposals on the part of the unified opposition? This is especially important, considering the fact that Trump's opponents in the U.S. are ready to use any means available to discredit or hurt him in any way possible – even if their actions would simultaneously inflict damage on national interests (as in the cases of the Israel and Russia-related anti-Trump moves made by the Obama administration in its final days).¹⁹ Even more unusual were Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton's attempts to get the U.S. intelligence and other special services involved in Clinton's claims that “all seventeen U.S. intelligence services” had proof of Russian involvement in the U.S. elections on Donald Trump's side.

In recent American history, there have been precedents of political pressure on the U.S. intelligence services – for example, George W. Bush's administration compelled the intelligence community to give false reports on the Iraqi nuclear program and Saddam Hussein's alleged link to al-Qaeda. Still, exercising pressure on the intelligence services in order to discredit one's political opponent inside the country (i.e. to pressure the intelligence services for a personal political gain), influence domestic public opinion, and thus change the internal policies of the incoming administration represents a principally new and dangerous precedent in American politics.

Trump's reform proposals represent a real threat to the entrenched interests of very influential political groups, actively working to prevent the foreign policy changes from happening and engaged in a complex of activities aimed at discrediting the President and intimidating his closest advisors and their families. Essentially, a very strange “alliance of convenience” has been formed

that includes leftist populist groups, the traditional liberal establishment, and hardcore right-wing politicians in order to discredit Trump's policies, turn public opinion against him, prevent the revision of the U.S. geopolitical priorities, and create a general feeling of instability in American society.

This coalition is comprised of a majority of the conventional elites, including the political establishment, the governmental bureaucracy, the "mainstream" media, the entertainment industry, the academic community as well as the globalist financial and IT business elites – essentially, the only elite groups supporting the President are the representatives of the "real sector" of the economy – conventional industry, first of all, manufacturing, and agriculture, quite favourably viewing his protectionist policies, and the military.

The goals of the opposition groups differ significantly: while the leftist opponents will resist any policies offered by Trump in order to delegitimize and weaken him politically, the right-wing Republicans whose mentality was formed during the Cold War are trying to prevent the conceptual change of the geopolitical orientation of U.S. foreign policy, specifically the shift from hostility toward Russia to cooperation with it. Finally, the foreign policy and security bureaucracy is against any significant reforms and sharp turns in policy goals and methods: these people remember very well the deep personnel cuts and structural reorganizations that followed the triumphal celebrations of the end of the Cold War twenty-five years ago.

These groups will keep trying to discredit Trump's policies, presenting them as inadequate, illegal and unconstitutional, and to block the passage of his legislative initiatives through Congress – both to prevent the implementation of these policies and in order to find/create a reason to start impeachment procedures, accusing the President of violating the law and the Constitution. Thus one can expect a further expansion of the anti-Trump campaign. This is a new and a very dangerous trend in American political life that can bring with it violence in the foreseeable future.

Tragically, U.S.-Russian relations have become a hostage to this anti-Trump campaign: first, due to the accusations crusade alleging Russian attempts to influence the U.S. elections and implying that the Trump campaign could be the beneficiary of such actions. Second, any White House reform proposals in both the domestic and the foreign policy arenas, including those involving U.S.-Russian relations, are meeting strong elite resistance. This state of affairs

was recognized in 2017 by Russia's Vladimir Putin, who stated with regret that relations with America had "become hostage to the internal political situation in the U.S... Certain forces use the Russian-American ties to solve internal political problems in the U.S... We are patiently waiting until this process in the internal political life in America will end."²⁰ Putin thus recognized that the issue was that of internal U.S. politics, with Russia having at present limited opportunity for showing its own initiative and changing the dynamics of bilateral relations.

Along with the changes in the geopolitical priorities and political style, Trump is trying to deal with this situation by pursuing an unconventional personnel policy, seeking people from outside the traditional political elite. Significant personnel cuts and structural reorganizations have taken place within the major intelligence, security and foreign policy governmental structures. Thus the White House is trying to lessen the influence of the established political elites and special interest groups in these spheres.

Still, only time will tell if Trump will manage to survive politically and implement his plans, including those in the foreign policy domain – the area in which he already accepted some degree of political compromise with the elites and significant revisions of his originally declared goals and policies.

Conclusion

A famous Chinese proverb states: "God protect you from living in the time of changes." It seems, meanwhile, that we and our close descendants are incredibly "lucky" – the Eurocentric system that has dominated the world for more than a half a millennium is starting to literally fall apart in front of our eyes. For the Europeans, who had established worldwide domination, simultaneously exploiting other regions and imposing on them their cultural, economic, and political models, the ongoing shift of the world power centre to the Pacific region represents a real systemic collapse. It signifies a decisive and irreversible loss of their positions in the world economic and political systems – a fact that their elites stubbornly refuse to recognize or accept. More than that: Europe continues, as it did in the 'good old' Colonial days, to live beyond its means, essentially ignoring the decline in its share in the world economy, refusing to establish control over its social spending, and continuously trying to impose its political will and cultural norms on others. Tragically overestimating its political, economic, and military importance and

consistently getting involved in international conflicts, e.g. Libya, Syria, and recently, Ukraine, the Europeans are further worsening their future prospects.

Meanwhile, for the two “continental” members of the world system, the U.S. and Russia, for all the differences in their economic and political structures and the gap of the economic and conventional military potential, this change is going to be painful, but they may be able to deal with it – their goal will be to “turn a head” – respectively, from the East to the West and from the West to the East. This will not be easy, especially because their main partners and/or opponents will increasingly be the states-civilizations with the multimillenia-long histories and non-European cultures, religions, and languages. This is going to be especially tough, considering the former’s messianic ideologies and their consistent, principal refusal to accept the others’ points of view and cultures as equal.

The relative weakness of Russia and the still essentially hegemonic position of the U.S. within the international system during the last thirty years overshadow the fact that they will have to work with each other in solving serious international issues and face the ever-growing China. Meanwhile, most of the established political elites in both countries (along with those in Europe) seem to be incapable of understanding these new realities or working toward finding a mutual accommodation. The West, in particular, refuses to see that sanctions and other anti-Russian measures lead to that country’s further alienation and are *de facto* pushing it toward an alliance with China – and this is a trend that neither the West nor Russia should welcome.

The current elite media campaign, aimed to a large extent against Trump, not Russia, creates a distorted virtual picture of the world that is completely separated from reality. Especially dangerous is the fact that its foreign policy results are essentially opposite to the desired ones: they push the Russian domestic and foreign policies further in an authoritarian and anti-Western direction, basically threatening the U.S. security interests. Under these circumstances, both the U.S. and Russia need to search for a political compromise (presuming some degree of mutual accommodation) and a new conceptual comprehension of the evolving international system configuration and their countries’ quickly changing places in it.

Endnotes

- 1 Samuel P. Huntington, Albert J. Weatherhead III University Professor of Government at Harvard University and a member of AEI's Council of Academic Advisers, delivered the ninth of the Institute's 1997-1998 Bradley Lectures. See: "A Uni-Multipolar World," *AEI Letter*, 1 July 1998, <http://www.aei.org/publication/a-uni-multipolar-world/print/> (Accessed 1 June 2018). According to Huntington, "A unipolar world is one in which a single state acting unilaterally with little or no cooperation from other states can effectively resolve major international issues, and no other state or combination of states has the power to prevent it from doing so. A multipolar world is one in which a coalition of major powers is necessary to resolve important international issues and, if the coalition is a substantial one, no other single state can prevent the coalition from doing that. A uni-multipolar world, however, is one in which resolution of key international issues requires action by the single superpower plus some combination of other major states, and in which the single superpower is able to veto action by a combination of other states."
- 2 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), p. 2.
- 3 George H. W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit," *The American Presidency Project*, 11 September 1990, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=18820> (Accessed 8 June 2018).
- 4 Philip Rucker, "Trump's Russia 'Hoax' Turns Out to be Real," *The Washington Post*, 17 February 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-russia-hoax-turns-out-to-be-real/2018/02/16/be3d174a-1346-11e8-9065-e55346f6de81_story.html?utm_term=.80cb17386e70 (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 5 Amie Ferris-Rotman, "Putin Uses Olympic Ban to Rally Support for his Presidential Bid," *Foreign Policy*, 7 December 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/07/putin-uses-olympic-ban-to-rally-support-for-his-presidential-bid/> (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 6 "70th Session of the UN General Assembly (in Russian)," *Kremlin.ru*, 28 September 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385> (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 7 "Steve Bannon Says the U.S. is Already in an 'Economic War' with China," *CNBC*, 16 August 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/16/steve-bannon-says-the-us-is-already-in-an-economic-war-with-china.html> (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 8 Alex Gray, "The World's Biggest Economies in 2017," *World Economic Forum*, 9 March 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/worlds-biggest-economies-in-2017/> (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 9 "Transcript: Donald Trump Expands on His Foreign Policy Views," *The New York Times*, 26 March 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html> (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 10 Jeffrey S. Pasel and D'Vera Cohn, "As Mexican Share Declined, U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population Fell in 2015 Below Recession Level," *Pew Research Center*, 25 April 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/25/as-mexican-share-declined-u-s-unauthorized-immigrant-population-fell-in-2015-below-recession-level/> (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 11 "Military Spending by NATO Members," *The Economist*, 16 February 2017, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/02/daily-chart-11> (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 12 "Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2009-2016)," *NATO Press Release*, Communique PR/CP (2016) 116, 4 July 2016, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160704_160704-pr2016-116.pdf (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 13 "President Donald J. Trump's State of the Union Address," *The White House*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-state-union-address/> (Accessed 1 June 2018).

- 14 Aaron Blake, "The Trump Administration's Weird Explanation for Withholding Russia Sanctions," *The Washington Post*, 30 January 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/01/30/the-trump-administrations-weird-explanation-for-withholding-russia-sanctions/?utm_term=.91e35d8a41a9 (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Elana Schor, "Deadline Looms for Trump and Russia Sanctions," *Politico*, 28 January 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/01/28/trump-russia-sanctions-deadline-373106> (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 17 Julian Borger, "U.S. 'Name and Shame' List of Russian Oligarchs Binned by Top Trump Official-Expert," *The Guardian*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/30/russia-kremlin-list-trump-administration-forbes> (Accessed 1 June 2018). Still, even in this case, serious questions in regard to Trump's real goals remain: first, up to this point, no specific action has followed in regard to the people on the list. Second, the very length of the listing and its all-inclusive character made many observers believe that the administration once again wants to put a brake on the sanctions.
- 18 Greg Jaffe and Damian Paletta, "Trump Plans to Ask for \$716 Billion for National Defense in Military Expenditures in 2019 – A Major Increase," *The Washington Post*, 26 January 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-plans-to-ask-for-716-billion-for-national-defense-in-2019--a-major-increase/2018/01/26/9d0e30e4-02a8-11e8-bb03-722769454f82_story.html?utm_term=.cecc73afe76c (Accessed 1 June 2018).
- 19 The last weeks of Obama's presidency were marked by a series of moves aimed at inflicting permanent damage on U.S. relations with a number of countries. These includes the orchestrating of a UN Security Council vote on a resolution condemning Israel, the expelling of 35 Russian diplomats and their families on Christmas eve in 2016, and the introduction of sanctions against the leadership of the Russian security and intelligence services. All these steps were aimed at weakening the U.S.-Israeli alliance, and destroying any possibility of effective U.S. cooperation with Russia in the security sphere, including blocking the exchange of intelligence information on the activities of DAESH and other fundamentalist groups, and preventing personal interaction between U.S. and Russian security officials. Obama expected that the U.S. sanctions would provoke reciprocal moves on the Russian side, making their meetings physically impossible.
- 20 Ivan Nechepurenko, "Putin Says Russia Has 'Many Friends' in U.S. Who Can Mend Relations," *The New York Times*, 4 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/04/world/europe/putin-russia-us.html> (Accessed 1 June 2018).