

Colloquy

Fyodor
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Fyodor Lukyanov, let's begin with the name of your magazine – "Russia in Global Affairs" How active is Russia in global affairs today?

It is difficult to measure the degree of activity, as there's no scale; it is easier to define a scale of weight, importance. Russia for objective reasons is now included in the top five countries which largely affect international processes. It is there together with the U.S., China, to some extent Europe (though Europe acts as a single organism in the economy, and as separate countries in politics). It is also possible to include in the top five one of the Asian giants, maybe India, although it has more of an influence through its presence than its activity. To some extent it is possible to think of including Turkey in the top five, because Turkish politics obviously go beyond the ordinary framework.

Russia is one of the influential leaders partly because of its presence too, because even if Russia does nothing, its location from almost the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean transforms it into a major player. For the last 10 to 12 years Russia has strengthened its international position, and Moscow is now taken into consideration more than before. However, there are also limits to influence. Russia's influence culminated after the military success in the Caucasus but before the eco-

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conomic crisis. Then came comprehension that it would most likely be impossible to achieve more in the way of rehabilitation after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. There is a need for a new strategy, the next phase of Russian policy. It is impossible to keep looking back at the events of 20 years ago and try to prove both to oneself and to the surrounding countries that the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which in Russia is still perceived by many as a national disaster, happened by chance. Now a new purpose and new reference point are necessary.

Beginning an article or scientific work with the words "after the collapse of the Soviet Union" has been discouraged in Western academic circles in recent years, since the periodization of modern history is being reconsidered. The Soviet Union was one of the parties in the bipolar world. However, "post-Soviet territory" as terminology loses its meaning, because the states formed

after the collapse of the Soviet Union have selected their own ways and developed according to their own scenarios, which they chose and formed themselves. What about Russia? Does the concept “post-Soviet territory” still remain for Russia or is it already a qualitatively new space? Are there new priorities?

As for discouraging the use of the expression “after the collapse of the Soviet Union”, this is partly because no analysis should be carried out proceeding from just one reference point. On the other hand, it is premature because another world order has not appeared. The former world order, based on two super powers, disappeared and nothing has come in its place. Notions about America having won the cold war, becoming the lawful and natural leader, began to fade from the beginning of the new century. The leader is not managing; even such a huge powerful country as the U.S. is not capable of bearing responsibility for the whole world.

Now we are in an extremely dangerous, chaotic phase when the last remains of the previous institutional design are being scattered. The international organizations have remained the same, but their work is deteriorating. Unfortunately, there can be no talk of any order until a new international system, based on clear princi-

ples with a clear balance, has been generated.

To return to the question about how Russia sees the post-Soviet territory, there is now an understanding at a psychological level that the disintegration is irreversible. But that configuration is not necessarily conclusive, because history shows that borders are not established once and for all. Therefore, the concrete outlines of the countries of the post-Soviet territory can change; actually, the war of 2008 showed how this could happen.

Russia itself is undergoing a tough mental transformation, the essence of which is as follows: Is Russia in its present borders the fully fledged sufficient state that was formed in 1991 and should develop further, or is it a splinter of the “real” country that we have lost? While the latter sentiments predominate, they will influence relations with neighbors, and to a greater degree will influence our own self-awareness because the constant reiteration of depression is not beneficial.

Here the experience of China is very important. The country developed practically in isolation. It had economic relations, but hardly developed the army and so on; over a very long period of time it practically had no serious ambitions, but

after achieving a certain economic level, it was ready to enter a full and competent struggle for world supremacy and entered an active phase in its political activity. Could Russia follow an isolationist policy – look inwards, carry out reforms and then start to think of restoring its geopolitical status to the level of the Soviet Union?

No. Certainly, Russia is absolutely another type of state, not even state, but political mentality. Well, first, in China everything is not very clear yet because the basic discourse under way there now is about whether they have reached a level at which it is possible to go out and declare any interests, or not.

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Yes, they have started to build aircraft carriers, but at the same time, both on high, and at expert levels, it is said constantly that they began to show themselves as a new force very early. In China they perfectly understand that the more declarative you are, the more resistance you get from

different directions. On the other hand, the feeling of power, which certainly amplified after the world economic crisis, is growing, because China came through it with the fewest losses and recovered the most quickly. And the attitudes of its neighbors are different now. For example, in south-east Asia the question is openly put, whether to remain in the sphere of political influence of the U.S. or whether it is time to think about replacing the patron. Be that as it may, China has now left the phase when it could “pretend to be wearing rags”, as the Russian saying goes. Whatever China does, the U.S. will perceive it as a potential rival who could challenge them, and this will logically lead to attempts at restraint and so on.

As for Russia, certainly our mentality is different. While China consciously belittles its own potential, Russia does the contrary. Russia felt so badly about the loss of its status that it tried on every occasion, no matter if it had the material capacity or not, to think of itself as an important player.

Now a new situation has emerged. Never in contemporary history has the main challenge for Russia – political, economic and security – come from Asia. Europe was always the geopolitical arena. But now Europe, the Euro-Atlantic zone, is becoming the periphery, and the Pacific region

the centre. To stretch a point on relations between the Pacific region and the main players, consider the way relations between the major European powers developed at the beginning of the 20th century: rivalry, envy and historical claims. It is well known what finally happened to Europe in the 20th century. The main challenge for Moscow is how to position itself in Asia, considering that two-thirds of Russian territory is situated there. How in this context will relations be constructed with the U.S.? In Europe the U.S. is unambiguously perceived as a competitor, a rival; in Asia the situation is different, because when it comes to balancing the influence of China, America is the only option. Therefore I do not rule out the possibility that if Russian-American relations in the coming 10-15 years change qualitatively, this will have happened because the political focus has moved to Asia.

As far as the post-Soviet area is concerned, two to three years ago it seemed that this was the place where super-power interests collided: here Bush and Putin, the Europeans with their “Eastern Partnership,” China all locked horns... This heating up of competition partly led to the war in the Caucasus. And now, everybody is dealing with their own big problems; nobody cares about the former USSR. America is mired in wars in the Middle East and battles with the budget

deficit. Europe as a political player has all but disappeared. Russia began to behave more calmly after it proved to everybody its superiority in this region, impulses from the outside ceased, and the question of NATO expansion was de facto removed. Certainly, it is all the same “sphere of privileged interests”, but if nobody openly encroaches on them, Moscow is not hurrying to realize its interests.

Russia needs a new strategy, given that not so much the big but the middle states have started to play key roles in the post-Soviet space. Turkish relations are more important for Russia going forward, as well as relations with Iran. China is gradually extending economic influence over Central Asia. Russia is in a transitional stage from imperial ambitions and instincts to something different.

Russia, as you have noted, is one of five powers that influence global processes today. However it is impossible to be a global player in all regions and to operate alone; that is, there should be partners, and these partnerships are formed through military-political blocs, economic cooperation and political and historical closeness. Today there are traditional and effective international organizations in the world. Traditional, certainly, is the United Nations, which nobody wants to renounce. Economic inte-

gration organizations such as the EU and military-political organizations such as NATO are most effective today from the point of view of integration and joint coordinated actions. In response to this, Russia actively takes part exclusively in the United Nations. It tries to introduce discussions in this organization, as it is a permanent member of the Security Council. There are also organizations, which have not exactly been created by Russia, but have its participation, such as the SCO, BRICS, and the CSTO. In your opinion, how effective are these organizations? Were they created in response to something or are they initiations of viable projects?

The picture you have described, the traditional and effective organizations, in my opinion, reflects the situation five years ago. Now the situation is changing very quickly. You say that the United Nations has lost the urgency – yes, and no. Certainly, the United Nations does not reflect the current reality of the 21st century. But why do all the discussions about expansion of the United Nations Security Council fail? Because expansion has to be based on criteria. The criteria used now have become outdated, but they remain absolutely unassailable. The winners in a war would take the prize and this is how it always was historically. The world

order was always formed after big shocks. The winning powers formed administrative institutions in the way they considered would best serve them. Then there would be a new war. And the cold war was unique; it did not transform into a hot one. But a new world order has not taken shape after the cold war. It is possible to debate forever why Brazil can join the Security Council and Argentina cannot. Why South Africa should represent Africa, instead of Egypt or Nigeria. And so on.

And in regard to effective institutions, I would think twice about ranking NATO as an effective institution. NATO degraded, actually, after the end of the cold war because NATO had become meaningless. While the Soviet Union existed, everything was clear. When it disappeared, there was a need for new enemies to be found.

International terrorism?

What are “international terrorists”? It is clear now that it is an internal problem, not a single global network. And when it is mentioned that potentially the U.S. needs NATO to solve problems not in the Euro-Atlantic area, but in East Asia, in the Middle East then, actually, the allies say, “Excuse us, but why should we care?” In Germany, asked what the Bundeswehr actually does in Afghanistan, the government cannot answer convinc-

ingly. Libya may turn out to be the last nail...

Former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said that “mission defines coalition” – the coalition depends on mission. So we have a mission, we collect a group; there will be another mission, we collect another group. Everybody condemned him, claiming that he undermined relations with traditional allies. But in essence he was right; in the 21st century apparently, groupings will be established on an ad hoc basis to address concrete problems. And if it is necessary for the U.S., speaking hypothetically, to solve a problem in the Taiwan Strait, it is not the case that they will rely on the European allies who, first, do not have the desire and, second, do not have the capability to fight there. The U.S. shall have to search for an ally who is more useful right there. This raises the role of Russia because the fewer dogmas inherited from the cold war there are, the more understanding there is of Russia being still one of the capable countries in the world, in terms of military power, despite all its huge problems, including in the field of defense.

In regard to the organizations that were initiated by Russia, or in which Russia participates, of course, initially many of them were constructed in an attempt at imitation or counterbal-

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ance. The CSTO was an attempt to show that we still play the leading role here; we have our own NATO. Now the situation is changing because the CSTO is finding a clear objective – to ensure the security of Central Asia after NATO and the U.S. leave Afghanistan. Even if America in any form still remains there, it will need a partner. The CSTO, first of all, is necessary for the member-countries, and now it is necessary to fill the organization with real, meaningful content. Of course, another question arises here. The problem is why are two countries outside Central Asia – Armenia and Belarus – in the CSTO? Earlier, when the CSTO was a “club of friends of Russia” it aspired to collect as many participants as possible. Now it needs to be made a capable alliance. Two countries have their own agenda, while the other countries have a common one, but are implementing it differently.

The SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) was created as a way to remind the U.S. that it is a visitor in Eurasia, which is hosted by China and Russia. It was created to serve the interests of China and Russia. Then the SCO began gradually to turn into an influential organization, though in Moscow and Beijing it is interpreted differently.

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For Moscow it is, first of all, a matter of security and attempts to involve China in problem-solving in Central Asia. For China, it is a matter of the economy: China wants to use the SCO to fill Central Asian markets with Chinese goods. There is no complete coincidence of interests here, and since the attention of the world to Central Asia is increasing, I think that the SCO will grow as an important unit. Understanding is growing that total instability in this region presents threats to everybody. But if it becomes apparent that the U.S. intends to remain in the north of Afghanistan for a long time, to keep a military presence in Central Asia, and in general proceed from its own interests, not necessarily from the interests of

the development of Afghanistan, then all the former fears, foremost of China, will revive.

What is your view of BRICS, or as Dmitriy Medvedev named it once “BRYUKI” (“pants” in Russian) and the states that are increasing their economic growth rates?

Well, BRICS is in general a symbol, rather than a reality, but an impressive symbol. Here again BRICS arose as the “states” which receive increasing attention because of their economies. It was introduced by Goldman Sachs for advertising purposes to attract clients to “emerging markets,” and suddenly, unexpectedly, everybody liked it, and began to use it...

And again is it used as a challenge or alternative to the U.S?

Challenge and alternatives are different things. First, for Russia BRICS is not about the economy. It is about the much talked-about multi-polar world, i.e. a reminder that the Western world does not possess a monopoly on global influence any more. There are important countries of the world that don't challenge the U.S; nobody, even Russia today, is going to challenge them. But it is possible to bypass the U.S. We are not against America, we simply want to diversify, put our eggs in different baskets. Mubarak had all of them in one basket. Well, where is Mubarak now?

And now we will place ours in many baskets and will be more stable. Naturally, the U.S. perceives it clearly as a threat and challenge.

Let's go down from the global to regional level. The last question is about the South Caucasus. Three states of the South Caucasus show three scenarios of behavior. Two countries look for patronage among the major powers – Georgia and Armenia. The result is obvious: Georgia loses regions and Armenia is in an economic blockade. On the other hand, Azerbaijan carries out an independent policy in accordance with its own interests. With whom is it more convenient for Russia to cooperate? With the state that can make concessions on sovereignty or with the state that has independent interests, economic interests and resources?

The South Caucasus countries indeed reveal different scenarios, but, for fairness' sake, note that they have very different starting possibilities. What Azerbaijan can afford, Armenia and Georgia cannot afford. If you ask the question, with which is it more convenient for Russia to cooperate, it is clear that it is more convenient for Russia to cooperate with the country that is ready to make big concessions, up to restrictions of sovereignty. This is an ideal case, but such cases practically do not happen. Armenia very

much depends on Russia, because of its objective position, but even there nobody is ready to throw away everything and find themselves exclusively under the influence of Russia. The modern world is a dangerous place for the medium and small countries. While during the cold war, any country made a geopolitical choice in favour of one of the superpowers, it received a certain set of guarantees. Now nothing is guaranteed; the patron can turn away at the first change of circumstances, as the Middle East has recently shown.

Countries that are guided by their own interests and form their own agendas, even if this agenda does not coincide, or completely coincide, with Russia's, receive more respect than a country that, from the point of view of Moscow, follows someone else. The worst option is if the country is perceived as a conductor of the interests of others. This is the case with Russia's perception of Georgia. Georgia is perceived not as an independent country, but as a tool of American policy; that's what they think in Moscow, anyway. And, certainly, out of these two options, the one of independence is more attractive.

Conducted by Farhad Mammadov