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THE EAST-WEST DIVISION IN EUROPE AS A CHALLENGE TO GLOBAL SECURITY²

ABSTRACT

The East-West division in Europe is a very old phenomenon. In contemporary international relations it is manifested as geopolitical trench between the Euro-Atlantic community (led by the United States) and Russia – the only remaining traditional European great power. The aim of this presentation is to explain sources of this division, and to point to its consequences for wider global security. The essence of this division is in post-Cold War U.S. efforts to achieve European (and later global) hegemony, and Russia's resolve to resist this and defend its independence and great power status. There are multiple causes of such U.S. expansionist policy: overall distribution of power in the international system, American national identity and interest, and prevailing ideas of Washington's ruling elite. The crisis in Ukraine deepened this division, pushing the world close to another global conflict. The only long-lasting solution to this problem could be basic transformation of U.S. foreign policy, in the direction of abandoning the strategic goal of ruling the world.

Key words: East-West division, Europe, United States, Russia, Ukrainian crisis

Introduction

We live in a challenging world. Old and new challenges are numerous: from economic crisis, across climate change, to new powerful viruses. Yet, the issue of war and peace remains the most pressing challenge, thus the most significant topic in international relations theory. In relative terms, our world is more

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peaceful than ever before, given that for several decades there has not been a single war between the most important actors on the international stage – the great powers. However, this does not mean that such war is not possible today. Rather than dismissing the possibility of another great war as a thing of the past, we should examine the conditions which have prevented this kind of war to erupt for such a long time, and see if these conditions are still with us. In this paper I argue that nature of the post-Cold War international order does not make it more peaceful compared to its predecessor, international order from the years of the Cold War. On the contrary, the East-West division in Europe that was the main characteristic of the Cold War order is still there, but without the bipolar balance of power which used to do a great deal in preventing U.S.-Russian cold rivalry of becoming hot. Thus, this East-West division is the greatest challenge to global peace and security. Ukrainian crisis pushed the world to the brink of another global conflict for the first time since Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Finding a solution to this precarious situation requires careful analysis of sources and consequences of the mentioned division, which follows in the rest of the paper.

Old and new East-West division in Europe

The division between the East and the West in Europe has existed since the very inception of the idea that Western European civilization is something different than the rest of the world.³ It had many forms through history, but the one of interest for this topic is the division between the Euro-Atlantic community led by the United States on one side, and Russia on the other. This division got its sharp contours at the end of the Second World War when the “iron curtain” descended upon Europe, and for several decades it had two main characteristics. The first one was struggle between the two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union (Russia) for hegemony in Europe and the world. The second one was the ideological clash between liberal capitalism and communism. Both of these two characteristics disappeared after Soviet Union’s unilateral decision at the end of 80s of the last century to withdraw from the Cold War. Russian Federation, which took Soviet Union’s place, was no more a superpower, thus the rivalry between two superpowers over world hegemony could not exist

³ On European East-West division and its historical forms, see Vladimir Trapara, “Istok ili Zapad?: lažna dilemma Srbije”, in: *Strateški pravci razvoja i utvrđivanja položaja Srbije u međunarodnim odnosima*, Marko Nikolić, Dragoljub Todić (eds.), IIPE, Belgrade, 2014, pp. 330–333.

anymore. Also, Russia got rid of communism, so the ideological clash was also gone. However, the East-West division with the same actors – the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia – was not gone. How?

The answer lies in the mentioned unilateral withdrawal of Russia from the Cold War. The fact that Russia ceased to be a superpower which seeks world hegemony and abandoned its ideology did not mean that the United States would follow its example. The United States continued to be a superpower which struggles to achieve world hegemony, while it also did not abandon its universalistic liberal ideology. So, the essence of contemporary East-West division of Europe is in the post-Cold War U.S. efforts to use its predominant power to achieve European and global hegemony and to create a new world order based on “universal” liberal values, and Russia’s resolve to resist this in order to keep its independence, great power status and cultural uniqueness. In this struggle Russia is defensive, *status quo* actor, while the U.S. is offensive, revisionist one. Washington’s geopolitical expansion to the East during the last 25 years moved the border between European East and West from the heart of Europe to the very Russia’s borders. This had a very negative impact upon European and global security.

Namely, the new East-West division in Europe is more dangerous compared to the old one, given that the balance of power which characterized the Cold War years is no more present. While the border between the East and the West ran through Germany, far away from both Washington and Moscow, crises that used to occur on the continent (Berlin, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia...) did not have the potential of escalating into a global war. This potential was also absent from wars that were fought on the periphery of the international system (Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan...). The only event that really threatened to lead the two superpowers to a direct military conflict was the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. The reason lies in geographic location of this crisis – in U.S. “backyard”, near the very shores of the United States. Today, when geopolitical trench between the East and the West runs through East Europe, every crisis has the capacity to resemble the Cuban crisis, given that it occurs in Russia’s “backyard”, on its very borders. This was the case with the Georgian crisis in August 2008, and this is even more the case with the current Ukrainian crisis.

Sources of U.S. expansionist policy

The main factor because of which the East-West division in Europe still exists is American geopolitical expansion against Russia. But what are the sources of

this expansion? I can identify at least three of them, on structural, ideational, and identity/interest level. Structural level is about distribution of power in international system. Post-Cold War system is characterized by unipolar distribution of power, with the United States as the only pole. Besides the U.S. there are two ordinary great powers (Russia and China),⁴ while other states that possess resources for this status do not count as great powers, given that they are semi-independent – these states are vassals of the U.S. (Germany, Japan, Great Britain, France, and Italy).⁵ There are also several more or less independent regional powers. According to John Mearsheimer’s offensive neorealism, to ensure their security all great powers seek expansion whenever they have an opportunity for it, with (regional or global) hegemony as their ultimate goal.⁶ For the United States, status of the only pole in the system is such opportunity – current distribution of power in the international system gives Washington the incentive to seek expansion aimed at achieving global hegemony. Global hegemony will be established when the U.S. eliminate remaining independent great and regional powers in the system (Russia, China, and Iran) by turning them into its vassals, thus transforming the organizing principle of the international system from anarchy to hierarchy. In his “softer” version of offensive realism, a neoclassical realist Randal Schweller claims that not all states seek expansion when they have an opportunity for it, but only those who are dissatisfied with current international order.⁷ The United States have been expressing dissatisfaction with an anarchic world order based on balance of power politics practically since its foundation. To discover reasons for this, we should look into factors other than distribution of power.

One of the factors is that of prevailing ideas in U.S. ruling elite. Most of the members of this elite think their country’s “exceptionality” entitles it to world leadership. To this self-believed just end, all disposable means are also just. For

⁴ I follow Randall Schweller, for whom not all great powers are poles, but only those that possess more than 50 percent of capabilities of the most powerful state in the system. Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998, p. 17.

⁵ This is also John Mearsheimer’s opinion. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Norton, New York, 2001, pp. 381–382.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 2, 22, 32–36.

⁷ Randall L. Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?” in: *Realism: Restatements and Renewal*, Benjamin Frankel (ed.), Frank Cass, London and New York, 1996, p. 119.

about hundred years, this way of thinking which assumed that use of force is justified for creation of a new world order based on American values has been dominant in Washington, and is called “militant idealism”.⁸ It is a mixture of Theodor Roosevelt’s realism and Woodrow Wilson’s idealism, and today it has two forms which are different only in details, but their essence is the same – neo-conservatism and liberal imperialism.⁹ These two forms have been replacing one another during the Post-Cold War period, but the constant in the official thinking of Washington rulers has always been that the U.S. should lead the world, using force if necessary. However, from time to time people with different ideas would be powerful enough to influence the creation of U.S. foreign policy, yet it never changed in its essence. This means that some other “hidden” factor should be responsible for this stubborn expansionist policy.

This is the identity/interest factor. According to David Campbell’s performative theory, identity of the state is not pre-given, but is constituted in relation to some difference and threat.¹⁰ Foreign policy has the task to identify this threat and devise a strategy to counter it.¹¹ U.S. identity is based on a very fragile and thus rigid Puritan political ethos which sees many threats, applies harsh measures for countering them, and is never eager to make compromises.¹² As a *par excellence* “imagined community” made of people of diverse origin who came to live on certain territory (New World), the U.S. has always had problem to justify its unity, and it has been basing it on ideological homogenization around this rigid ethos.¹³ The supreme value in this ethos is individualism. This is why the United States is extremely intolerant towards anarchy in the international system, because its means relations on equal footing between collective entities – sovereign states – which could have different values.¹⁴ On this identity, which sees a threat in international anarchy and competition of different values, U.S. revisionist interest is based, which assumes the destruction of international anarchy and establishment of a

⁸ Donald E. Schmidt, *The Folly of War: American Foreign Policy 1898-2005*, Algora Publishing, New York, 2005, p. 25.

⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, “Imperial by Design”, *The National Interest*, January/February 2011, pp. 19–34.

¹⁰ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992, p. 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 119-125.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

new world order based upon universal (in fact American) values. All three sources of American expansionism and hegemonism explain why Russia is Washington's principal geopolitical enemy.

First, Russia is an independent ordinary great power. Unlike the other traditional great powers that abandoned this status because they were either defeated in war (Germany, Italy, and Japan), or lost their colonial empires (France and Britain), neither is the case with Russia, so it is natural that it wanted to keep its status. Second, dominant school of political thought in Russia during the modern history has been Statism, which assumes the country should be centralized and strong on the inside, and a great power on the outside. The predominance of this school of thought could be explained by the need to balance two other schools of thought that oppose one another and thus could threaten the country's unity – Civilizationism and Westernism.¹⁵ Third, geopolitical position on the crossroad of the vast Eurasian space and internal ethnic diversity influenced the constitution of the identity which rejects any universalism. Thus, Russia sees a threat in U.S. hegemonic project aimed at creation of the new world order based upon universal values, and prefers the order which would be governed by several independent and equal great powers, in which competition between different values would exist.¹⁶ Russia's interest is in securing the *status quo*, with the UN Security Council playing the role of the concert of independent great powers. These three factors – imbalance of power, militant idealism versus statism, and incompatible identities/interests, explain the prolonged enmity between expansionist United States as the leader of the West, and Russia who wants to preserve independence for the East.

Ukrainian crisis as both a consequence and a source of deepening European East-West division

U.S.-Russian relations had already been strained before Ukrainian crisis erupted in November of 2014. After the failure of Obama's "reset", conflicts

¹⁵ On these schools of thought, see Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Plymouth, 2010, pp. 4–8.

¹⁶ For the summation of incompatibilities in Russia's and U.S. identity, see Vladimir Trapara, "National Security Strategies of Russia (2009) and the United States (2010): A New Stage in the Reproduction of Incompatible National Identities", *The Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 1149, January-March 2013, p. 18.

over important bilateral issues followed one another. Russia's diplomatic victory in September, when it prevented U.S. military intervention against Syria by resolving the crisis over Syrian chemical weapons, halted Washington's geopolitical expansion into Middle East. The U.S. quickly found an open space where it could equal the score. Ukraine was the East-European country which contained the East-West division within itself. When it comes to identity, it was a torn society – roughly divided between pro-Western and anti-Russian part of the population in northwestern regions of the country, and pro-Russian citizens (including ethnic Russians) in the country's southeast.¹⁷ This situation left military and political neutrality as the only foreign-political option for Ukraine, given that very survival of this state would be put into question if its regime decided to align either with the West, or Russia – another half of the country would resist such move. Thus, pro-Russian and pro-Western political forces that have been replacing one another in power in Kiev since Ukrainian independence, all stuck to more or less neutral policy.¹⁸ This was about to change in autumn 2014.

The crisis in Ukraine started when President Yanukovich refused to accept agreement on association with the European Union, which was offered to him with an obvious geopolitical motive – as bait for Kiev to distance itself for Moscow – given that Ukraine was not even nearly meeting EU conditions for signing such agreement.¹⁹ Pro-Western activists revolted on the streets in November, requesting Yanukovich's resign. After he made some authoritarian mistakes and further enraged the protesters, these protests escalated into open violence with dozens of victims on both sides.²⁰ Western political leaders strongly supported the protests, picturing the events in Ukraine in a black and white fashion – as a struggle for democracy against corrupted government that kills its own people. Finally, in February 2014, several leaders of European countries brokered the agreement between Yanukovich and opposition leaders, which

¹⁷ Samuel Huntington was the first to call Ukraine a “torn country”. Semjuel P. Hantington, *Sukob civilizacija i preoblikovanje svetskog poretka*, CID, Podgorica, Romanov, Banja Luka, 2000, pp. 184–187.

¹⁸ Dragan Petrović called this political dynamics the “Ukrainian tetter”. Dragan Petrović, *Geopolitika postsovjetskog prostora*, Prometej, Novi Sad, IIPE, Belgrade, 2008, pp. 50–62.

¹⁹ “‘Don’t humiliate Ukraine’ – President defiant over EU deal proposals”, *RT*, November 27, 2013, Internet, <http://rt.com/news/ukraine-eu-yanukovich-protest-368/24/10/2014>.

²⁰ “Ukraine leader, defying West, signs laws against protests”, by Richard Balmforth, *Reuters*, January 17, 2014, Internet, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/17/us-ukraine-law-idUSBREA0G1E22014011724/10/2014>.

should pave the way for political solution of the crisis.²¹ However, extremists soon took control over the revolution and ousted Yanukovich from power. Western countries turned a blind eye to this brutal breach of the agreement they pledged to guarantee.

New revolutionary government, with some extremists – fascists from western Ukrainian regions, was openly pro-Western and anti-Russian. One of the first decisions it made was to cancel the law which used to enlist Russian among official languages in the country.²² This radical change of course – from neutrality to alignment with the West against Russia and the will of eastern half of Ukraine, sparked rebellion in pro-Russian regions of the country. Crimea went farthest, by holding the referendum in the beginning of March, when people of this peninsula decided to leave Ukraine and join Russian Federation. Moscow also could not stand idle to this obvious attempt by the West to drag Ukraine into its own sphere of influence and turn it against Russia, so it decided to respect the will of the people in Crimea and officially annexed this region.²³ However, this did not mean that Russia opted to tear Ukraine apart. Its preference was still a united (although without Crimea) and neutral Ukraine, which required some kind of federalization of this country, so that eastern regions would get into position to prevent Kiev’s pro-Western and anti-Russian course. Further, Russia’s open military intervention in Ukrainian eastern regions would have the risk of escalating into broader conflict, even global war, because of the mentioned similarity of this crisis with the Cuban one half a century ago.

This is why Russia would not act the same way it acted in Crimea when some other eastern regions of Ukraine – Donetsk and Lugansk – rebelled against Kiev.²⁴ It would subtly support the rebels to resist Kiev’s offensive, hoping it would bring

²¹ “Ukraine president, opposition sign EU-brokered agreement on ending crisis”, *RT*, February 21, 2014, Internet, <http://rt.com/news/ukraine-president-opposition-sign-agreement-114/24/10/2014>.

²² “Canceled language law in Ukraine sparks concern among Russian and EU diplomats”, *RT*, February 27, Internet, <http://rt.com/news/minority-language-law-ukraine-035/28/10/2014>.

²³ Before this, Federation Council of Russia decide to authorize President Putin to use military forces in Ukraine in order to stabilize the situation. “Russian senators vote to use stabilizing military forces on Ukrainian territory”, *RT*, March 1, 2014, Internet, <http://rt.com/news/russia-ukraine-approve-military-371/28/10/2014>.

²⁴ For example, in May Moscow called upon rebels to postpone their independence referendums, and Federation Council canceled the authorization to use military forces in Ukraine. “Putin calls for end to Kiev’s military op, postponing referendum in E. Ukraine”, *RT*, May 7, 2014, Internet, <http://rt.com/news/157404-putin-ukraine-crisis-kiev/30/10/2014>.

upon described political solution – federalized Ukraine. However, when Kiev’s offensive during August (following an incident with downed Malaysian airliner) threatened to crush the rebels completely, Moscow increased its military help to Donetsk and Lugansk, enabling them to start a counter-offensive which would eventually lead to Kiev’s acceptance to sit at the negotiation table with them in Minsk. The ceasefire was signed at the beginning of September, turning this conflict into “frozen” until the political solution is agreed.²⁵ For now, political solution is not yet in sight. Russia is not ready to give up on its demand for federalized and neutral Ukraine, while the United States is trying to block the efforts for such compromise solution, striving to fuel anti-Russian sentiments in the rest of Ukraine and isolate Russia. Thus, the East-West divide in Europe, whose deepening contributed to the outbreak of Ukrainian crisis, is further deepened as the result of it. Russia’s wise diplomatic moves during 2014 prevented the escalation of the crisis into a global conflict, but it still has such potential, due to U.S. stubborn policy of eastern geopolitical expansion.

Conclusion

Deepening of the East-West divide in Europe is certainly the most pressing security challenge in the world today. U.S. geopolitical expansion, fueled by structural, ideational and identity/interests factors, faces similarly assertive Russia’s resistance. This “clash of the Titans” threatens the world peace more than this used to be the case during the Cold War, because of the current imbalance between the two powers. What is the solution to this? How can this European divide be overcome, and another global war avoided? Given all mentioned circumstances, a necessary condition for this is a change in U.S. foreign policy. Washington should give up on its geopolitical expansion and the very idea of new world order based on “universal” values, and respect Russia (and other global and regional powers) as equal and independent actor on the world stage. How could this be possible, given the stubbornness of American expansionist policy? A radical change should take place in U.S. identity/interest. For this, new ideas within U.S. political elite should prevail, but this would not be enough. The world will have to wait for a decisive shift to take place in international distribution of power. The decline of U.S. and the rise of Chinese

²⁵ “Minsk Protocol: Ukraine to be decentralized, special status for Lugansk, Donetsk”, *RT*, September, 7, 2014, Internet, <http://rt.com/news/185700-lugansk-donetsk-special-status/30/10/2014>.

power could at some point result in Washington's acceptance of the notion that world hegemony is not feasible. Instead, a new realistic foreign policy should be born. Its main goal would be the maintenance of the balance of power in international system. In this case, Russia would be the natural ally of the U.S, for it is the only great power that could effectively help to contain rising Chinese power. A new multipolar balance of power would eventually lead to a great powers' concert. Cooperation would win over conflict, and united world would replace the existing division.

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