
Global Trends

From the Incredible to the New Normal: Delusions and Realities in World Politics

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Abstract—A phenomenon of political history is explored whereby events evolve, in the course of time, from the realm of the incredible to the new normal. An emphasis is made on the topic of European security. The role of objective and subjective factors is pondered. The key trends are analyzed in contemporary international relations; a distinction is drawn between virtual and real processes; the ideas of a new bipolarity and a new Cold War are discussed. Considerable attention is paid to the main divides in the system of global governance and regulation, both constructed and natural ones. A conclusion is drawn on the indispensable role of international analytics in providing science-based foresight into future developments and think-tank support of foreign policy.

Keywords: foreign policy, political history, European security, trends in contemporary international relations, New Bipolarity, New Cold War

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1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Over the more than three decades that have passed since the end of the bipolarity era, many events have taken place in Russia and worldwide that have profoundly changed public stereotypes about the state of international relations; about the longstanding parameters of these relations; about what is unthinkable, even taboo; and about what is permissible and acceptable. History is composed of events weaving intricate patterns with its spindle. Most of them fit into the conception of the ordinary flow of time and create the routine background of life. However, there is also a category of events that seem incredible before they actually happen, but once they become reality, they strongly influence the course of history. The great interest in the nature of the large-scale changes that are transforming people's lives and thoughts is manifested in discussions about the so-called Overton windows, i.e., technologies, including political ones, that are used to influence, even manipulate, the mass consciousness. Phenomena such as social networks, artificial intelligence, and digital capabilities for shaping human behavior are now more salient than ever before. The concept of *posttruth* has taken root.

A few years prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, such a scenario had seemed implausible for the vast majority of people, including specialists both in

the Soviet Union and abroad. A few years, even months, prior to the United Kingdom EU membership referendum, few people seriously considered the possibility of a Brexit. The same can be said about such events that forever changed the modern international landscape: the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, the “great recession” of 2008–2009, the 2015 migration crisis in Europe, the coming to power of Donald Trump and Trumpism, the Covid-19 pandemic, etc. Relatively recently, only the most daring prognosticators foresaw the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. All of the above events, except for the pandemic, which became a common disaster, caused bewilderment and rejection among some and support or even delight among others as did, e.g., the destruction of the “twin towers” in New York in some parts of the Arab world. The reaction depended on the side the “spectator” took—the victim or the beneficiary. Eventually, the pandemic, too, turned into a field of geopolitical confrontation.

The issue of European security stands out and apart. Those now living who, owing to their age, have a chance to compare what security meant in the late 1980s and what it means today should fathom the scale of change. Back then the possibility of NATO's expansion into the states of the former socialist commonwealth, apart from the united Germany, was something from the realm of fantasy. Even more surreal would have seemed the entry into NATO of any of the

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former Soviet republics. When the Baltic States became members of the alliance, the scenario that other parts of the former Soviet Union would enter NATO was still beyond the brink of reality. Until 1999, the possibility of NATO using military force outside the boundaries of its responsibility, i.e., solely to protect the territory of the bloc's members from external aggression, seemed unbelievable. The bombing of Serbia, Belgrade, and other Yugoslav cities shattered this stereotype. All of the above happened and, with all the ensuing consequences, became part of our reality, which some became accustomed to and began to take for granted, while others resented such events, for one reason or another, refusing to consider this the new normal. The beneficiaries of the change, when criticizing their opponents, use images of revanchism and revisionism, and the latter, in turn, respond with accusations of reactionism, illegitimacy, hegemonism, etc.

It is this paradigm of deep disagreements regarding what is normal and what is unacceptable that sets the framework within which we should consider the contradictions associated with NATO's expansion and the Ukrainian crisis, with the development of the latter into large-scale hostilities on the territory of Ukraine in 2014–2015 and then in 2022. In the West, the expansion of the alliance to the east and the open-door policy have become the new normal, an axiom, although thirty years ago it would have seemed an unlikely scenario even for them. When the unbelievable became reality, Moscow refused to accept it as a *fait accompli*. The radical divergence regarding what is permissible and what is unacceptable led in 2022 to a major military conflict on the territory of Ukraine, in fact, to a proxy war between Russia and the North Atlantic Alliance, with the European Union also taking part on the side of the latter.

When analyzing how the incredible can transform into a norm in public consciousness, in this case in international relations, it is important to consider the category of the objective and the subjective, i.e., to determine what in history is due to some natural law independent of the human factor and what is due to chance, coincidence, or the role of personality factor. This dilemma can be visualized as the scales of history with the objective on one pan and the subjective on the other. The task is to determine what is to be placed on each pan. History is not an exact science; it involves much of what is uncertain, relative, and difficult to verify. Nevertheless, it has its own laws and, hence, the possibility to classify, qualify, measure, and predict. Otherwise, history, including political and international history, would not be a science. In addition, in each specific case, it is important for the researcher to answer the following question: Does the personality factor manifest itself through the utilization of windows of opportunity opened up by objective historical processes, or is it a specific person that attempts to make history him/herself even in the absence of objective enabling conditions? This is a subtle line, but

without drawing it, one runs a greater risk of making incorrect conclusions in analyzing the history of international relations when it comes to finding out at what times subjects of history (whether individuals or states) utilized windows of opportunity and at what times they made erroneous decisions. The latter could be due to delusions either about the presence of objective enabling conditions, which in fact did not exist, or about the ability of the individual voluntarily to correct the course of history contrary to its laws.

It can be argued with certainty that there is a law of the “rise and fall of the great powers.”¹ This law is important for examining the current state of the world because national states remain the key subjects of international relations in the 21st century. Therefore, the state of international relations, including the issues of war and peace, depends on the interactions between national states, on the balance of power between them and on how it changes. The laws of history manifest themselves in what has happened repeatedly in the course of development of humankind, i.e., in events that have been repeatedly observed, recorded, and described. This kind of research focuses, *inter alia*, on the rise of some centers of power and the weakening of others. To this end, historians have applied, at different times, paradigms such as historical materialism, the category of uneven development, world–system analysis, the hypothesis of ethnogenesis, the theory of long waves, civilizational approaches, etc. Indeed, over the centuries, dozens, even hundreds of different state entities would sink into oblivion and new ones would appear. It was not only individual states that emerged and perished, the same happened with numerous empires and even civilizations.

In this sense, the postbipolar model of international relations is not much different from the previous ones: a new redistribution of forces is taking place between states and their unions; a new phase is unfolding in the rivalry over who will set the main parameters of development. The competition between the leading subjects of world politics is largely affected by the public ideas about the incredible and the acceptable, about traditions and the “new normal,” about coincidence and regularity, about the subjective and the objective. Given the unprecedented level of development of modern technologies, it is now more tempting than ever to use them for influencing the mass consciousness.

The above contains some examples of events that have moved from the category of the unlikely to that of a new reality. It can be assumed that several other historical processes are currently undergoing such a transition, e.g., the escalation of the contradictions over Taiwan into an eventual war between China and the United States.² The likelihood that nuclear weapons

¹ The most complete description of this law is given in [Kennedy, 1997].

² A high probability of an armed conflict between the United States and China was predicted as far back as 2017 [Allison, 2017].

will be used in any given conflict in the foreseeable future seems less and less fantastic. The issues of independence of Scotland and Catalonia and the military clash between Greece and Turkey are moving from the realm of fantasy into reality. Manmade and climatic cataclysms, too, pose a threat of new shocks to humankind. Such cataclysms are impossible to predict yet almost inevitable, like new pandemics; one can even say they are programmed by the very course of history.

2. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GLOBAL WORLD

In order to distinguish more clearly between what is fiction and what is the new reality, let us take a closer look at the key characteristics of the current phase in international relations. The popular terms of recent years have been deglobalization, fragmentation, localization, and regionalization. Indeed, the world (albeit not yet falling apart) is undergoing serious structural changes. One should not overemphasize these changes, but one should not underestimate them either. For quite a long time, we have been witnessing and participating in a “great redistribution” of international relations. It is quite adequately described by the concept of *polycentrism*.

Long-term centrifugal and centripetal processes are going hand in hand. Globalization is being slowed down at the top tier—let us call it the “global world”—but at the lower tier the importance of regional integration projects is only growing. The strategic decoupling of the United States from their European allies is underway. Recently, it has been glossed over by a demonstration of Euro–Atlantic solidarity against the backdrop of an escalation in the relations between Russia and the collective West. The geopolitical and technological decoupling of the United States and China continues as well. It is accompanied by a further rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing. In international relations, many players are disoriented, take a wait-and-see attitude, and hedge their risks. Meanwhile, the realization that the world is irreparably changing is taking root. A destabilization cascade is unfolding with many overflow effects, like in a system of communicating vessels.

The United States is stepping up efforts to retain what is left of its world dominance despite the diminishing chances of success. Meanwhile, it is facing growing internal problems, which will manifest themselves in the midterm congressional elections in November 2022 and, with renewed vigor, in the 2024 presidential elections. The Gulf States are behaving quite differently than before. India remains an autonomous player, continuing to maneuver in the turbulent waters of international politics. The countries of Latin America, primarily Mexico and Brazil, are acting more and more independently. Russia, China, Belarus, Cuba, Venezuela, Burma, Iran, Turkey, and

Vietnam are conducting their foreign and domestic policies under the flag of sovereignty. Similar processes are taking place in Africa, where even small countries like Mali are making efforts to change their geopolitical orientation. Independence is displayed by important international organizations, such as OPEC, ASEAN, and the African Union, and by a considerable number of G20 countries.

A qualitatively new dimension opens up in the questions of freedom or nonfreedom of market relations. The collective West has moved in the relations with Russia, figuratively speaking, from the use of high-precision sanctions weapons to sanctions “carpet bombing.” In fact, this means an ultimate transition from using sanctions as a tool for adjusting the foreign and domestic policy of a state to using them as a tool of punishment on a national basis and a means of regime change.

In the Old World, the era of prosperity, comfort, and abundance is receding into the past. French President Emmanuel Macron made yet another resonant statement on this matter at a government meeting on August 24, 2022. In Europe the postwar social contract between the elites and commoners, which was based on the principles of social market and welfare society, is no longer working. The washing out of the middle class continues as does the polarization of party–political systems and the formation and strengthening of “new populism” movements. There is an ongoing corrosion of strategic thinking, which is clearly manifested in the largely irrational policy of the European Union towards Russia or its ill-conceived course in the field of energy transition. Increasingly surprising is the incompetence of top officials not only in the European Union but even in the leading European countries—just consider such a figure as Boris Johnson, let alone Liz Truss. The functions of representative democracy are being emasculated, as Brexit has clearly shown.

The future uncertainty is increasing, and the multiplication of risks makes it difficult to measure and evaluate them adequately. Over a historically short period of time, Western Europe has had to part with such a popular and seemingly inevitable narrative as the European Dream [Rifkin, 2004]. The American Dream narrative in the United States failed even earlier amid identity wars and deepening political divisions. In China, however, the mobilization potential of the Chinese Dream continues to grow. Tensions are high in the post-Soviet space. Belarus and Kazakhstan experienced large-scale destabilization; the frozen conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has turned into a burning one.

The intellectual thought of Europe is going through chaotic times. Some argue about the “new Middle Ages,” as Roberto Vacca and Umberto Eco once did [Eco, 1994; Vacca, 1971]. This thinking refers to the spread of network relations, decentraliza-

tion, and multilevel management in the modern world [Zielonka, 2006; Kelemen, 2016]. The green thinking, too, has gained mass popularity, but it is highly likely that the “green deal” will only result in the European Union outwitting itself—instead of an increase in the competitive advantages of the European Union in its rivalry with China and the United States, the Union’s attempts to introduce green economy everywhere will only reduce the living standards and welfare of the European population.

Europe now sees an apparent deprofessionalization of the elites, which is manifested itself at both the national and supranational levels, e.g., in the Brexit phenomenon; in relations with Russia, the United States, and China; in the level of competence of many representatives of the European establishment at both the central and local level. One of the reasons is that the European Union continues to delegate the sovereignty of its member states in favor of supranational structures and transfer powers from the national level to the Brussels bureaucracy. Of course, one should not overemphasize this process because the members of the European Parliament are elected by the population of the EU countries, and the top decisions are still made by the European Council, i.e., by summits of the heads of the member states, rather than by the European Commission. However, the European bureaucracy continues to concentrate power in its hands. By its very nature, bureaucracy operates by different rules than elected politicians. The latter must fulfill their election programs, carry out reforms, take certain risks, and, wherever possible, be guided by strategy as well as tactics. The bureaucracy, in turn, has to carry out protective measures and avoid risks, and it is not directly responsible to the electorate.

Different versions of polycentrism are possible, depending on what will become the supporting elements of its design. The idea of a new bipolarity is popular. But no matter how intellectually convenient it may seem, given the deep understanding of the bipolarity of the Cold War era, there are good reasons to doubt the possibility of reproduction of this former version of bipolarity. Many authors have written about this, and the debate about the new bipolarity and its varieties will surely continue [Kortunov, 2022; Fenenko, 2022; Gromyko, 2020]. It seems that polycentrism in international relations of the 21st century is quite compatible with some elements of the new bipolarity. Thus, from the perspective of economic relations and trade, the term bipolarity is acceptable since the economies of the United States and China, first, are approximately equal in size and, second, are several times ahead of their closest competitors. Together, they account for more than 40% of global GDP. But then it would be more appropriate to speak about *economic bipolarity* although this assumption, too, is quite loose—the 40% of global GDP attributed to these two economies is indeed a lot, but the share of the others is greater by a factor of 2.5. Moreover, the

Soviet–American economic bipolarity was characterized by an almost complete mutual isolation. In contrast, the modern economies of the United States and China are closely intertwined both with each other and with the rest of the world.

Advocates of the new bipolarity also emphasize that the current ideological divide between the two largest powers resembles that in the postwar era. However, despite all the ideological difference between China and the United States, it can hardly be compared with the ideological abyss between American capitalism and Soviet socialism, with the missionary work of the two former superpowers. Now the development of the two parties proceeds mainly in the market paradigm, which has room for both neoliberal and state capitalism, and the deep ideological divides of the postwar world have given way to rather speculative value differences. If the previous Soviet–American confrontation had a deep ideological background, now ideological differences are but a lining for the geopolitical struggle. It is only the adherence to different political systems that remains a matter of principle. If, nevertheless, we assume that the new American–Chinese bipolarity will emerge in a full-scale form, then the question arises of what place in such a world would be assigned to Russia, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and other major players. So far, judging by their actions and the strategies declared in their national concepts, they are not going to encourage the emergence of a new full-scale bipolarity in which they would find themselves in second or third place. On the other hand, there are many states, mainly belonging to the collective West, that behave as if they would support a new bipolarity on the side of the United States.

Alongside the new bipolarity disputes, a heated debate is unfolding on another topic, closely intertwined with the former one, i.e., the concept of a new cold war [Dykin, 2022; Rogov, 2016; Gromyko, 2019; Doyle, 2018; Lucas, 2014; Legvold, 2016; Brands, 2022].³ Different points of view have been expressed for a long time, first of all, whether this concept is, in principle, applicable to describing the current state of affairs in international relations. The main parameters of this phenomenon are analyzed in the search for similarities and differences between the Soviet–American confrontation model and the current realities. It is often emphasized how different the “new” Cold War is from the “old” one. It makes sense to ask the following question: If the current situation is so different from the previous one, is it at all justified to give it the former name? Indeed, the term cold war has not been applied to the rivalries of different great powers in different periods of history before 1945. As a result, terminological confusion occurs. Things of one qualitative dimension are given a name that was

³ Abrams, E., “The New Cold War,” *NR Magazine*, Mar. 3 (2022). <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2022/03/21/the-new-cold-war/#slide-1>. Cited August 27, 2022.

first applied to an essentially different international situation.

It is certainly possible to draw historical parallels and look for similarities. But there is a clear tendency to apply the term Cold War literally to modern processes, which are fundamentally different in many respects, thereby “adjusting” the modern situation to match the phenomena of the previous era. In the recent (by historical standards) past, we had an outwardly similar situation with the usage of the terms World War I and World War II. After 1945 and the development of atomic weapons, one began to speak about World War III. It is now tempting to come up by analogy with another terminological series: Cold War I and Cold War II. Following this logic, one could also propose the term Cold War III, assuming that the first such war was fought from the end of the 1940s between the Soviet Union and the United States; the second one over the last 15 years between the United States and Russia; and the third is being fought now between the United States and China [“Remarks by Vice President Pence...”, 2018].⁴

Of course, World War II largely ensued from the outcomes of World War I, but it was neither a repetition of the latter nor its second stage. The names of these two armed conflicts reflect their global nature, in the same way as the name Cold War reflects its essence as a global conflict between two superpowers in economic, military, and ideological aspects. Therefore, if one accepts the term the new Cold War (or Cold War II and III), then one also has to agree that the world remains bipolar and that the main processes depend on the confrontation between two superpowers. Thus, those who claim that the new bipolarity reflects reality have to prove the realness of a new Cold War, and those who support the plausibility of the latter have to prove the realness of a new bipolarity. Speculatively, one can prove both, but for the sake of realism and persuasiveness, one should at least present arguments that polycentricity has ended in failure and turned out to be an illusion in the same way as unipolarity. Such a conclusion, if it had turned out to be right, would require a profound revision of Russia’s foreign policy strategy.

3. DIVIDES: FAR-FETCHED AND REAL

A new bipolarity and new Cold War do not seem to be plausible images of the future although the Overton window effect, beneficial this time to the United States, has allowed these images to proliferate in the public consciousness and the scientific discourse. In conclusion, we should note yet another false trail leading to an analytical dead-end. The United States is vigorously promoting the narrative of a global divide

between democracies and autocracies.⁵ But how accurately does it reflect the actual situation? Suppose a small number of states in the world are indeed democracies and autocracies in a pure form, but it is obvious that the majority of states worldwide embody a variety of transitional, hybrid forms. Here we see Washington’s duplicity undisguised since there are too many autocracies among the United States’ allies and too many “patented” democracies that act dictatorially when they need to.

One is getting the impression that the United States decided to impose the postwar template onto the 21st-century world and see if it works again in its favor. For example, the United States declares a new Cold War against China and expects the latter to lose it, like the Soviet Union did (in the United States, this point of view is almost an axiom). Or it declares that the key challenge is the confrontation between democracies and autocracies and expects that such a declaration would be enough to rally allies firmly around itself. In acting so, the United States is a *status quo* state. It ignores the modern international context, which is fundamentally different from the postwar world order; it masquerades the world in the old clothes of the former Cold War by recreating dependent blocs around itself and upping the ideological ante in international relations to the utmost. In so doing, it makes use of the various retro-concepts, e.g., Anglo–Saxon leadership as a form of world domination based essentially on the ethnic principle and on the idea of one’s own superiority. A special case of such domination is the Anglo-sphere concept, which is popular in the British political class.

In our opinion, the real line of confrontation (rather than the far-fetched divides) passes between, figuratively speaking, the world of natural resources and the world of technology; the world of fossil fuels and the world of green economy; or, more broadly, between the world of the real economy and the world of the uncommodified financial add-on structure. Against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis, especially conspicuous is the rivalry between those who supply resources and those who consume them. Of course, such a picture requires serious clarifications. For example, Russia needs its own high technologies no less than it needs to maintain its leading position in the raw-materials markets. France needs its own nuclear energy no less than it needs green technologies. The United States is one of the largest exporters of liquefied natural gas, being simultaneously a technological leader in areas not related to mining and mineral extraction. It can be argued that, in the foreseeable future, the strongest competitive advantages will lie in the hands of those states that will have secured both resource-based and technological sovereignty in critical industries.

⁴ Perlez, J., “Pence’s China speech seen as portent of ‘New Cold War,’” *New York Times*, Oct. 5 (2018); Rogin, J., “Pence: ‘It’s up to China to avoid a Cold War,’” *Washington Post*, Nov. 13 (2018).

⁵ See, e.g., [Kortunov, 2021].

The world now presents many challenges that can truly unite the vast majority of humanity. Apart from the eternal one—the task of creating favorable external conditions for internal socio-economic development and ensuring, for this purpose, the necessary minimum of international cooperation—the new century puts at the center of the positive agenda challenges such as climate change, combatting dangerous diseases, nonproliferation and nonuse of mass destruction weapons, and migration control. Speaking of Russia, it is necessary to add strategic risks such as depopulation, scientific and technological backwardness, an unacceptable level of social inequality and population welfare, and various security threats. Ukraine has been transformed into anti-Russia for the foreseeable future. Russia has a rather vulnerable geographic perimeter in terms of the “southern underbelly” and the security of the Kaliningrad exclave.

What appears unlikely today may become reality tomorrow. There is a high demand for modern international analytics to provide science-based foresight and to discriminate between the real-world processes and far-fetched, or artificially constructed, ones. It is necessary to use such analytics to find the most favorable (in terms of national interests) balance between the objective and subjective effects in history. In order not to fall into the trap of the Overton windows, it is necessary to study continuously and comprehensively the phenomenon of the new normal, i.e., in what ways and in whose interests global-community rules are formed, including mass conceptions, both real and virtual.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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