



## THEMATIC DOSSIER: The Difficult Path from Bipolarity to a Multipolar World Order: To the 80th Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War


### ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ: Трудный путь от биполярности к многополярному мироустройству: к 80-летию Победы в Великой Отечественной войне

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## Russia and a Just World: How to Overcome the New Bipolarity?

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**Abstract.** In the struggle for the future world order, various concepts of a just global order collide. Russia's foreign policy documents emphasize the importance of establishing a world order that is multipolar and based on the dialogue of civilizations, respect for national sovereignty and mutual security. These principles are only partially shared by other participants in international relations, among which the United States and China stand out in terms of their ideological and power potential. Due to the importance of these powers and the growing contradictions between them, the danger of the formation of a new bipolar system of international relations is increasing in the world. The experience of the Yalta-Potsdam system shows the tendency of the bipolar system to ideological and value confrontation and the use of force to resolve conflicts. The emergence of such a system of international relations was the result of fundamental differences in the understanding of the principles of a fair world order by the two sides with the existing parity of military and political capabilities of the parties. The basis of the fragile peace in the conditions of the bipolar system of international relations became the danger of mutual destruction of the parties with nuclear weapons. International rules and institutions, including the UN Charter, proved incapable of guaranteeing peace. Therefore, the main lesson of the Cold War should be considered the need to prevent the very emergence of bipolarity, which could bring the world on the brink of war and even total destruction. This article analyzes the threats of the formation of a new bipolarity in connection with the escalation of the conflict between the United States and China in international relations. Today, these countries have the most powerful material and force capabilities, as well as fundamentally different visions of a fair world. Since the Cold War, the United States has been guided by the universality of its democratic ideals, while China offers a concept of global "harmony" in accordance with the ideals of economic development and the recognition of civilizational differences. The election of Donald Trump as president implies a revision of democratic priorities in favor of confirming the military-

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economic dominance of the United States in the world. Russia could play a special role in the formation of a multipolar and multilateral order in Eurasia as a prototype of the future world order. The conditions for progress in this direction are associated with strengthening the military-political balance in the region, developing intercivilizational dialogue, economic openness, and multilateral institutions.

**Key words:** bipolarity, cold war, multipolarity, world order, justice, USA, China

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## Россия и справедливый мир: как преодолеть новую биполярность?

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**Аннотация.** В борьбе за будущий мировой порядок сталкиваются различные концепции справедливого глобального устройства. Внешнеполитические документы России подчеркивают важность установления такого мироустройства, которое было бы многополярным и основанным на диалоге цивилизаций, уважении национального суверенитета и взаимной безопасности. Эти принципы лишь отчасти разделяются другими участниками международных отношений, среди которых по своему идейному и материально-силовому потенциалу выделяются США и Китай. В этой связи нарастание противоречий между этими державами усиливает опасность формирования новой биполярной системы международных отношений. Опыт Ялтинско-Потсдамской системы свидетельствует о склонности биполярной системы к идейно-ценностной конфронтации и силовому разрешению конфликтов. Возникновение такой системы международных отношений стало результатом принципиальных различий в понимании двумя сторонами принципов справедливого мироустройства при сложившемся паритете военно-политических возможностей сторон. Международные правила и институты, включая Устав ООН, оказались неспособны гарантировать мир. Поэтому главным уроком холодной войны следует считать необходимость предотвратить само возникновение биполярности, способной поставить мир на грань войны и даже всеобщего уничтожения. Исследование посвящено анализу угроз формирования новой биполярности в связи с нарастанием в международных отношениях конфликта между США и Китаем. Сегодня эти страны обладают наиболее мощными материально-силовыми возможностями, а также принципиально различными видениями справедливого мира. США со времени холодной войны исходят из универсальности своих идеалов демократии, в то время как Китай предлагает концепцию мировой «гармонии» в соответствии с идеалами экономического развития и признания цивилизационных различий. Избрание Д. Трампа президентом США предполагает пересмотр приоритетов демократии в пользу подтверждения американского военно-экономического доминирования в мире. На основе сравнительного и социально-интерпретационного метода делается вывод о вероятности нарастания конфликта между великими державами. России могла бы принадлежать особая роль в формировании многополярного и многостороннего порядка в Евразии как прототипа будущего мироустройства. Условия продвижения в этом направлении связаны с укреплением в регионе военно-политического баланса, развитием междоцивилизационного диалога, экономической открытости и многосторонних институтов.

**Ключевые слова:** биполярность, холодная война, многополярность, миропорядок, справедливость, США, Китай

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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## Introduction: Lessons of the Cold War

There are ongoing debates about the origins of the stability and fairness of the world order in international relations theory. Realists emphasize the importance of the military-political balance of power, while liberals proceed from the priority of the development of international rules, norms and institutions. These debates, however, will be too abstract if we understand military-political and institutional realities outside the national-cultural context. In a world divided by national and cultural-civilizational boundaries, the differences in the understanding of what is right, and fair are inevitable.

Such differences in the understanding of the bipolarity of the Cold War period are evident. The United States and Western countries saw the origins of the Cold War mainly in the global threat of the spread of communism, as well as the desire of the Western world to contain this threat and protect the ideals of freedom and democracy in the world. It was assumed that these ideals would become the basis for a just world order.

For the USSR, which was a signatory to the creation of the United Nations (UN) as the institutional basis of the international system, as for modern Russia, the main principle recorded in the Charter of the Organization is the sovereign equality of states. Consequently, justice implies mutual recognition of the parties and the differences in their systems, while observing the assumed international obligations. Therefore, Soviet leaders saw the origins of the Cold War in the West's desire to impose its values and interests on Europe and the USSR, contrary to the norms of sovereign equality and the Yalta-Potsdam agreements. In particular, the

American Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of post-war Europe was met by Joseph Stalin, Vyacheslav Molotov and other leaders of the USSR as the US desire for expansion and disrespect for the agreements reached.

Thus, the emergence of the bipolar system of international relations was primarily the result of fundamental differences in the understanding of the principles of a just world order by the two sides. Another determining factor was the established parity of military and political capabilities of the USSR and the USA. Having emerged from a series of wars and dangerous crises, such as the Korean War, the Berlin and the Cuban Missile Crises, the military and strategic parity made it impossible for one of the rival parties to advance its concept of justice solely by relying on force. The basis of the fragile peace in the conditions of the bipolar system of international relations was the danger of mutual destruction of the parties with nuclear weapons. International rules and institutions, including the UN Charter, proved incapable of guaranteeing peace. Therefore, the main lesson of the Cold War should be considered the need to prevent the very emergence of bipolarity, which could put the world on the brink of war and even total destruction.

The study is devoted to understanding the relations between the USA and China, the reasons for the escalation of their conflict and the formation of a new bipolarity in international relations. The rise to power of Donald Trump in the United States has further exacerbated their confrontation due to political competition and different concepts of justice promoted by each side.

The research approach we have chosen to understand the nature and prospects for the development of international systems combines the ideas of constructivism and realism. While realists proceed from the fundamental importance of the balance of power for maintaining peace (Wagner, 1994), constructivists pay attention to the comparability of national ideas and values in international relations (Sutch, 2001; Reus-Smit, 2018). The idea of justice is one of the most important in motivating behavior, and under certain conditions, the states are ready to defend their idea of justice even in the absence of material and force resources to do so.

The study aims to answer the questions of when the idea of justice becomes paramount in international relations and how they can develop if states are guided by different ideas of justice but have comparable power capabilities.

The study hypothesis can be formulated as follows: if there are profound differences in the understanding of international justice by great powers, their conflict becomes more likely, since the discrepancy in views on the nature of a fair international system contributes to increased mutual distrust of the parties and the possible perception of each other as a threat. The likelihood of conflict increases in conditions of parity in the military and power capabilities of the parties, especially if the parties are convinced of the need to use these capabilities to maintain their positions in the international system and if there are no powers in it whose power capabilities can contribute to changing the existing balance of power.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Therefore, bipolar systems may be even more dangerous for international stability than multipolar ones. There is an extensive literature on the stability of bipolar systems (see: (Waltz, 1964)). The opposite point of view was expressed by other representatives of realism, including (Deutsch & Singer, 1964). For recent reviews, see: (Kuklinski, Mitchell & Sands, 2020). There is also a significant literature on international systems in Russian studies. See, for example: (Istomin & Baikov, 2019; Safranchuk & Lukyanov, 2021; Lebedeva & Nikitina, 2020).

For Russia, the emerging American-Chinese confrontation is more dangerous because the country does not have the material and power potential of the second half of the 20th century and the ability to reconcile politically the differing American and Chinese concepts of a just world order. Nevertheless, acting in partnership with other responsible powers, Russia could help to overcome the dangerous slide of the modern world towards bipolarity. Firstly, Russia remains a great power and has the opportunity of reducing the severity of US-Chinese tensions and stimulating the formation of a multipolar world. Secondly, Russia plays a significant role in the formation of a new institutional architecture of the world, which in the long term could mitigate the danger of a bipolar conflict. Thirdly, Russia has historically advocated openness of trade and economic ties and inter-civilizational dialogue in Eurasia and beyond.

In order to disclose the topic, comparative and socio-interpretative methods are used. The comparative method allows us to consider the relations of major powers in dynamics, identifying the main indicators of their political and material-force development. This method is used by researchers of the realist school. The second method, used by constructivists, is associated with the desire to identify the features of the understanding of the international situation by various participants in international relations, that is, the major powers that we are considering. This method requires an analysis of statements by political leaders and allows taking into account the peculiarities of the subjective perception of global processes.

Structurally, the article is divided into several sections. The first section asks the questions about the relationship between such concepts as justice, power and polarity. The second section describes the contours of the new bipolarity, and the third analyzes the Russian concept of justice. The fourth section is devoted to identifying the threats to US global dominance based on the American concept of a just world

order that persist in modern conditions. This concept poses a threat to China, Russia and a number of other powers, including some European allies of the United States. The fifth section examines Chinese ideals of a just world. As applied to Russia, they imply not only the possibility of jointly countering threats from the West, but also act as an alternative to the Russian concept of justice. China has not demonstrated a willingness to make its concept of justice more open to the participation of a number of Western and non-Western countries. In the Chinese world order of the future Russia is assigned a less significant role than the Russian leadership would like. The final section contains a more detailed analysis of the possibilities of overcoming US-Chinese bipolarity in the context of the Eurasian region, which is a priority for Russia.

### **Power, Polarity, and Justice in International Relations**

There is a rethinking of the relationship between realism and constructivism in contemporary literature on international relations. Realists continue to proceed from the desire of states to ensure national security and sovereignty, and the priority of the balance of power in maintaining peace. At the same time, one of the new directions of realism — neoclassical realism — is more inclined to perceive the importance of “soft” substances such as ideas and values in understanding why states perceive each other differently and can enter into conflicts (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016).

Constructivists, especially if we take a broad understanding of this direction, including poststructuralists, now often comprehend the significance of ideas in their political and power dimensions. It is important for constructivists to understand how national ideas can contribute to building a better understanding of the international environment and liberation from its external political and civilizational pressure. On this basis, some researchers suggest considering

the possibility of synthesizing some ideas of realism and poststructuralist/postcolonial theory (Karkour, 2022). And although their complete synthesis is hardly possible due to the difference in approaches and assumptions, the development of a dialogue between realism and constructivism can contribute to a better understanding of the processes of interstate interaction.

Such interaction of constructivism and realism can also bring us closer to understanding the problems of the formation of international systems, where the material-power and ideological-civilizational dimensions are intertwined. Modern studies of international systems have significantly departed from the usual Western canon and consider them not only as a result of the Peace of Westphalia, but also as a consequence of the activities of non-Western powers and their civilizational values (Zarakol, 2022). According to these studies, the functioning of international systems is determined by both differing civilizational values and configurations of power relations between major powers (Burbank & Cooper, 2010; Mankoff, 2020). In the foreign policy refraction of such relations, the ideological and civilizational ideas of states are synthesized in the idea of justice, which can be defined as national ideas about the correct structure of international relations and the rules underlying them. Naturally, every large nation and state will have quite original ideas of justice, as the result of national history, traditions and strategic culture.

Therefore, for a better understanding of international systems, it is important to consider, firstly, how the ideas of the main actors about the justice of the international order are consistent within them, secondly, their material and power potential, and thirdly, the number of key actors in the system. It is also especially important to analyze the interaction of value and political relations of the largest, system-forming powers, such as the USSR and the USA during the Cold War or the USA, China, Russia and India at present. Great powers are extremely sensitive to their immediate geographical environment and



seek to influence it using their political and cultural-civilizational influence. In order to avoid conflicts, these powers seek to form mutual understanding with others on three key issues:

- 1) geographical spheres of political and cultural influence beyond their national borders,
- 2) the international balance of power,
- 3) the limits of external interference in their internal affairs.

It is not always possible to form such understanding due to political competition and private mistrust of large countries towards each other. This is especially difficult to achieve in bipolar systems with radically different ideological and civilizational views of the main actors.

### Contours of the New Bipolarity

The modern world is still far from being bipolar in the sense of the world after the end of World War II. The bipolarity of the Cold War was based on the division of the world along ideological-value, military-political and economic boundaries. Today, despite the weakening of globalization processes, a high degree of economic and informational interdependence remains. The world is experiencing processes of political and value polarization between supporters of traditional and liberal-modern values, but the participants in the conflict of values often live in the same societies and are not divided by territorial-political boundaries, as during the Cold War, when one side assumed the inevitability of the disappearance of the other one as a condition for its survival and development. In those conditions, the ideologies of liberalism and socialism confronted each other, while today we are talking about a confrontation of values and lifestyles, not ideological narratives.

In contrast to the period of bipolarity, the modern world is dominated by the processes of disintegration of the Western hegemony system. Researchers have repeatedly drawn attention to the accelerating trends of destruction and disintegration of various international institutions

and subsystems. For example, the authors of the 2018 *Valdai Report* used the metaphor of the “crumbling” of the world order to describe the trends of disintegration, believing this process to be irreversible and stating the impossibility of recreating the foundations of global regulation.<sup>2</sup> It is obvious that the processes of overcoming instability and forming the foundations of a new world order will take a long time in the context of the desire of the weakening West to maintain its dominant positions.

Nevertheless, there is much fair in the arguments of those who believe that the foundation of the modern world is a new Cold War, and the bipolarity associated with it. The danger of the West’s confrontation with Russia and China was pointed out by Russian researchers, who linked such a confrontation with the West’s attempt to outplay the global balance of power in its favor.<sup>3</sup> Among Western researchers, similar ideas about a “new Cold War” were expressed, in particular, by R. Legvold (2016) and R. Sakwa (2023a; 2023b).

The new bipolarity is not yet a fact, but the military-political and ideological-value dimensions of the American-Chinese contradictions that we have noted indicate the possibility of the world to move in this direction. Even those who tend to exaggerate the tendencies of confrontation in the world often correctly understand the meaning of important trends in international relations. The United States has already fully realized that China never strived for full economic and ideological integration into the Western system of international institutions and was wanting only to gain new opportunities for national development.

<sup>2</sup> Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik Ya., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. Life in a Crumbling World // Report of the Valdai International Discussion Club. 2018 (October). (In Russian). URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/reports/zhizn-v-osypayushchemsya-mire/?ysclid=m5kvgcfv9y272206474> (accessed: 24.12.2024).

<sup>3</sup> Karaganov S. Russian Foreign Policy: “We Are Smarter, Stronger and More Determined” // Sergey Karaganov. July 11, 2016. URL: <https://karaganov.ru/en/we-are-smarter-stronger-and-more-determined/> (accessed: 24.12.2024). See also: (Karaganov & Suslov, 2018).

The West, and the United States in particular, assumed that such integration would happen sooner or later and would contribute to the consolidation of Western dominance.

The growing movement toward bipolarity is linked to the United States' awareness of its weakening position in the face of growing China and Beijing's unwillingness to change its policy under American pressure. The election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016 led to a change in American policy. The emphasis was placed on depriving China of privileged access to international markets and achieving US superiority in trade and technological development. Washington sought to sabotage or at least slow down China's strengthening position in the world. Since the election campaign, Donald Trump insisted on establishing *the America First* principle in the world. His track record included a deal and ongoing negotiations with China on more favorable terms in trade, pressure on the telecommunications company *Huawei*, playing the 'Taiwan card' by promoting Taiwan's membership in the UN, continuing to contain China in the Pacific Ocean, and much more.

The US military doctrine has established that China is viewed as America's main competitor in the world.<sup>4</sup> On the wave of coronavirus development, China was accused of leaking the virus from a government laboratory in Wuhan, and USA threatened with sanctions and demanded financial compensation. The issue of trillion-dollar compensation that China should pay for its "malicious" actions was also raised.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Republicans and Democrats are largely equally negative about China, although in percentage terms these sentiments are different. In 2020, such a negative

perception, according to a *Pew Foundation* survey, was characteristic of 72% of Republicans and 62% of Democrats.<sup>6</sup> Sinophobia was intended to strengthen the US position in the world and facilitate America's exit from the crisis of national identity that hit it (Tsygankov, 2020).

Joseph Biden's policy after 2020 became a continuation of Donald Trump's policy, supplemented by even more active support for Taiwan and the restructuring of Pacific alliances for the sake of military and political containment of China. Joseph Biden was convinced that the world order is impossible without maintaining American dominance and sought to strengthen ties with allies in the context of the confrontation between "democracies" and "autocracies." He believed that "toughness" in relations with China was necessary in order to confront the "repressive" state and maintain the US's leadership position. J. Biden repeated the well-known idea from the time of Barack Obama, according to which the rules of the world order and world trade should be written by the United States, not China.<sup>7</sup>

Donald Trump's second presidential term promises a continuation and deepening of the conflict leading to the bipolarization of international relations. If Joseph Biden still sought to maintain global economic and political openness in the sense that they are understood in Western liberal circles,<sup>8</sup> and also took steps to involve China in dialogue, then under Donald

<sup>4</sup> New US military Doctrine: "Don't Stop the Enemy from Stepping into the Abyss" // Regnum. January 22, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/2370721#!> (accessed: 20.12.2024).

<sup>5</sup> The US Estimated the Damage to the World from the Pandemic at \$9 trillion // RBC. May 20, 2020. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/05/2020/5ec559329a79474abfe3c610> (accessed: 20.12.2024).

<sup>6</sup> Devlin K., Silver L., Huang Ch. U.S. Views of China Increasingly Negative Amid Coronavirus Outbreak // Pew Research Center. April 21, 2020. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/04/21/u-s-views-of-china-increasingly-negative-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/> (accessed: 24.12.2024).

<sup>7</sup> Biden J. R., Jr. Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump // Foreign Affairs. January 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again> (accessed: 09.07.2024).

<sup>8</sup> Brands H., Feaver P., Inboden W. In Defense of the Blob: America's Foreign Policy Establishment Is the Solution, Not the Problem // Foreign Affairs. April 29, 2020. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-29/defense-blob> (accessed: 09.07.2024).

Trump we should expect a different policy. He is inspired by the ideas of nationalists who do not aim to lead the world, but to become stronger and more independent at the expense of the rest of the world. Nationalists do not seek to harmonize interests, but to forcefully impose their understanding of the principles of international interaction.

At the same time, China is by no means inclined to become dependent on the tough policy of the United States. The Chinese leadership has not fundamentally changed its approaches either to issues of trade and technology, or to the integration of Taiwan, or the strengthening of political alliances in the world. The latter became obvious at the stage of the Russian-Western confrontation during Russia's special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine. Although the Chinese leadership did not provide Russia with significant military support and took a special position on the settlement of the conflict, in general, China's policy cannot be considered as yielding to US pressure. China maintained most of the existing areas of economic cooperation with Russia, did not support Western sanctions, and deepened military-political ties with its northern neighbor that are not related to the SMO. Having received a certain benefit from anti-Russian sanctions, concerning, for example, non-ferrous metals, oil and gas projects, or the auto industry, China, nevertheless, according to many experts, has not shown a tendency to use them unilaterally. Moreover, the sanctions have spurred mutual cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

The described movement toward a new bipolarity is aggravated, as during the Cold War, by the weakness of international institutions and the need for the United States and China to maintain the image of an external enemy for the purpose of internal consolidation. The latter is

especially characteristic of the United States, which is experiencing an internal crisis of national identity. In relations with the outside world, this crisis is expressed in the search for those to whom the country's problems can be blamed: "Islamist terrorism," "the Putin regime" and the "repressive" Chinese state. Today, China, along with Russia, Iran and North Korea, is considered the main long-term threat to the United States. The embeddedness of the noted conflict of values in the global political confrontation contributes to its radicalization. Some claim the "universality" of their values, others insist on their "uniqueness," but both proceed from their moral superiority. Neither China nor Russia is ready to accept the West's claims to universality and to maintaining its dominance in the world. The world remains interconnected, but as a result of the growing contradictions between the US and China, it is becoming increasingly fragmented along military-political, economic, technological and informational lines.

### **Russian Concept of a Just World**

In the context of the growing conflict between the United States and China, a significant role belongs to ideas that help transfer the conflict into the sphere of constructive interaction. In this regard, the desire of the Russian leadership to formulate ideas and policies for the formation of a multipolar world in which diplomacy, multilateral institutions and dialogue of civilizations would play an important role deserves attention.

Like China, Russia is not satisfied with the United States' desire for global dominance, which leads to ignoring Russian security interests. Russia's foreign policy documents proclaim the formation of a multipolar world in which Western countries are considered equal, rather than privileged partners.<sup>10</sup> The expansion

<sup>9</sup> The Chinese Are Benefiting from anti-Russian Sanctions // Russian-Asian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. February 2, 2018. (In Russian). URL: [https://raspp.ru/press\\_about/ot-antirossiyskikh-sanktsiy-vyigryvayut-kitaytsy/?ysclid=ma3zf24qhh13423062](https://raspp.ru/press_about/ot-antirossiyskikh-sanktsiy-vyigryvayut-kitaytsy/?ysclid=ma3zf24qhh13423062) (accessed: 01.12.2024).

<sup>10</sup> The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin on March 31, 2023) // MFA of Russia. March 31, 2023. (In Russian).



of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the deployment of anti-ballistic missile (ABM) elements in close proximity to Russian borders, military support for Ukraine and the introduction of large-scale sanctions against Russia could not help but strengthen the positions of hard-liners in the Kremlin in relations with the West.

In addition to striving for multipolarity, the Russian leadership seeks to develop multilateral formats, involving, in addition to China, large countries of the Global South and the Eurasian region. At the same time, Russia officially positions itself in international relations as a state-civilization, open to dialogue with the West and the East.<sup>11</sup> As a result of the aggravation of relations with the West in connection with the conflict in Ukraine, Russian foreign policy accents have shifted to non-Western countries. In this case, the global justice is understood not only as overcoming the dividing lines in world politics, but also as a policy that meets the interests of the ‘world majority.’

During the SMO, Russia strengthened its relations with China, India and other countries of the Global South, benefiting from its export potential of agricultural and energy products. Countries such as Türkiye, China, India, South Africa, Brazil and others, have increased their power and diplomatic status, proposing various initiatives to end the war in Ukraine and achieve a new international settlement (Rewizorski, 2025). It remains to be seen how these initiatives will contribute to ending Russia’s conflict with Ukraine and the West. One possible outcome is that the end of the conflict will cement a global transition from American “unipolarity” to a qualitatively different world order. It is also possible that the world will become more fragmented and divided.

In March 2023, in response to the above-mentioned international changes, Russia adopted a new Foreign Policy Concept, in which the main

priority was to establish itself as a “civilization-state, a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power.”<sup>12</sup> For the first time in the post-Soviet years, relations with Western countries were not designated as a priority. Instead, the emphasis was on eliminating “the vestiges of dominance of the United States and other unfriendly states in world affairs.” The declared priorities of the Russian state include the development of bilateral relations with countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, as well as the creation of international institutions outside the West, such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), RIC (Russia, India, China), etc. In its relations with the West, Russia intends to be guided by the “complex realities of a multipolar world,” hoping that the future will allow the West to be guided by these realities, abandoning “confrontational policies and hegemonic ambitions” in favor of “dialogue and cooperation.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, for the first time in the post-Soviet years, Russia is building relations with the outside world without considering the West as the central player in the international system. After 30 years of trying to proceed from this understanding, Russia is opening a new chapter in its foreign policy, corresponding to the formation of an international system and world order without the dominance of Western interests and values.

### **The Preservation of the Threat of US Dominance**

The threat of a new bipolarity is directly related to the above-mentioned US determination to maintain its dominance in international relations. In the country’s politics, this threat is linked both to the absence of a clearly formulated ideological alternative to maintaining global hegemony within America itself and to the

URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/> (accessed: 24.12.2024).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

country's significant ability to impose such hegemony on the world.

Despite the fact that the US today is an internally divided country, this split has not yet led to the formulation of an ideology of a 'normal' country that recognizes the equality of values and interests of all participants in international relations. The split between Donald Trump and his supporters, on the one hand, and representatives of the liberal establishment, on the other, does not lead to a rejection of global dominance. On the contrary, the polarization of the country that accompanies the identity crisis is supposed to be overcome precisely by strengthening the US global hegemony. The internal crisis can be overcome by uniting the country's political class around the ideas of the dominance of the "free world" and confronting China and the countries that challenge America. The differences between the Republicans and the Democrats are significant, but they concern their different understanding of the role assigned to the rest of the world in securing American supremacy. While the Republicans, led by Donald Trump, emphasize force and coercion, the Democrats would like to "manage the world" with the help of organizations, unions, and institutions created for this purpose.

An example of this kind of "solution" offered to the world is the policy of the American political establishment on the issue of settling the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The Democrats represented by the Biden administration, as is known, did not welcome dialogue with the Russian leadership, advocating for the military strengthening of Kiev and the strategic weakening of Moscow. Dialogue with Russia was seen as a dangerous concession, fraught with strengthening the position of a strategic adversary and leading to the undermining of the world Washington's rules-based order. However, the solutions considered by Donald Trump are also based on the policy of strength and maintaining American dominance and include the preservation of new territories for Russia, provided that the rest of Ukraine is

included in the orbit of the West and the weakening of the Russian-Chinese partnership.<sup>14</sup>

The main concern of the United States remains strengthening its positions in Europe and Eurasia by gaining significant advantages in the negotiations to end the conflict.

At the same time, the United States retains considerable military, political, economic and media capabilities to remain in the position of the dominant world power. In the military-nuclear sense, no one can compare with it except Russia. In the financial and economic sphere, the American positions are stronger than many. The American dollar remains the main world reserve currency, although the situation is far from stable, given the size of the external debt, the growing share of non-dollar transactions and the decreased authority of the United States in the world. Under certain conditions of geopolitical aggravation, a collapse of the dollar is possible, but for now the United States maintains and even strengthens its positions.

In the energy sector, the influence of the United States has increased as a result of the undermining of the Nord Stream and Europe's refusal of Russian oil and gas. The return to power of Donald Trump creates new incentives for the development of the American energy industry. In addition, the United States maintains the most extensive network of mass media in the world.

The continuing positions of the United States in the world are associated not only with military, political, economic and media capabilities, but also with the fact that the United States has not yet suffered a single major defeat. The inglorious wars in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan are over, but the US withdrew its troops, saving face in front of its own population and insisting that the tasks set were accomplished. The army remains combat-ready, allowing Washington to defend the rules-based

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<sup>14</sup> Trump Promised to Separate Russia and China if He Wins the Election // RIA Novosti. November 1, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://ria.ru/20241101/trump-1981274203.html> (accessed: 24.12.2024).

world order that US established itself. For all these reasons, people prefer to live in peace with the US and negotiate on all major issues.

The gradual reconquest of some new positions in the international system or their seizure without prior arrangement by China, Russia, Türkiye and others has not yet fundamentally changed the overall dynamics of the world. In many ways, this dynamic can be described not only as the formation of multipolarity, but also as a crisis of unipolarity and a relative, perhaps reversible, reduction of superpower capabilities. Based on the experience of the Cold War and its aftermath, there is no doubt about the determination of the US to continue using its capabilities to suppress any resistance to its dominance in the world. This determination will slow down the already difficult process of transition to a new world order.

### China's Challenge

In terms of its combined economic, military and other capabilities, China has become the most significant adversary for the United States in realizing its global ambitions. Observers first began talking about the possibility of a cold war between these two countries when Joseph Biden outlined his plans to confront China as the most important competitor to the United States.<sup>15</sup> The United States and China disagree on most important issues, including human rights, US military aid to Taiwan, China's relations with its neighbors and the status of the South China Sea, Beijing's economic and technological policies, assistance to Russia in overcoming Western sanctions, etc. Despite the slowdown in economic growth and a number of structural problems, Beijing's capabilities remain enormous. Having dealt with the COVID-19

crisis, the Chinese leadership has resisted pressure to revise bilateral trade and technology development policies on terms favorable to the United States.

At the same time, the partnership with Russia strengthens China's ability to confront American global dominance. In this regard, Beijing is increasing its economic and military cooperation with Moscow. Due to comprehensive Western sanctions against the Russian economy, China sharply reoriented its energy exports to Asian and non-Western markets, as a result bilateral trade with China more than doubled to USD 240 billion.<sup>16</sup> The military partnership between the two countries is expressed in regular joint military exercises, cooperation in air defense, and the achievement of an "equal, trusting partnership and strategic interaction" relationship enshrined in 2001 treaty.<sup>17</sup> Beijing associates Russia's SMO with the West's non-recognition of Russian security interests and fears US increasing aggressiveness in case of Russia's defeat. According to Chinese experts, Beijing will be able to protect better its interests in various areas through strategic cooperation with Russia (Leksyutina, 2024). On February 24, 2023, the Chinese Foreign Ministry proposed a peace plan that did not condemn Russia's actions or demand the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory. Instead, the plan provided for a ceasefire, the protection of civilians, and the immediate start of peace talks.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, the strengthening of "the China — Russia axis" against the United States

<sup>16</sup> Bilateral Trade Volume Between China and Russia Sets New Record // Sector Media. November 28, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://sectormedia.ru/news/riteyl/obem-dvustoronney-torgovli-mezhdu-kitaem-i-rossiey-postavil-novyy-rekord/> (accessed: 12.12.2024).

<sup>17</sup> Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China // President of Russia. July 16, 2001. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3418> (accessed: 04.12.2024).

<sup>18</sup> China Has Published a 12-point Plan to Resolve the Conflict in Ukraine // RBC. February 24, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/02/2023/63f80f5d9a7947dbaf8ab785> (accessed: 22.12.2024).

<sup>15</sup> Lewis S., Pamuk H. Biden Administration Singles Out China as 'Biggest Geopolitical Test' for U.S. // Reuters. March 4, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/biden-administration-singles-out-china-as-biggest-geopolitical-test-for-us-idUSKBN2AV28B/> (accessed: 12.12.2024).

and its allies increases the likelihood of moving towards a bipolar system of international relations. Such bipolarization may result not only from a Russian-Western conflict, but also from Moscow's increasing involvement in the confrontation between Washington and Beijing. Russia has its own interests in the world, different from those of China. They concern economic and transport projects in the Arctic and Central Asia, the structure of mutual trade, and a number of other issues (Denisov & Lukin, 2021). China advocates closer cooperation with Russia based on deeper industrial integration, while seeing "imperial complexes" in Russian ambitions in the Eurasian region.<sup>19</sup> In turn, Russia would like to avoid integration into China's geoeconomic schemes on its terms. China views Eurasia not as an independently formed region, but as a transit space for its global projects (Pieper, 2018). It is assumed that only 15% of the routes within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) may pass through Russian territory. At the same time, China, like the European Union, does not cooperate with the EAEU and its transport projects.<sup>20</sup>

The development of tensions between China and the United States promises continued instability and puts Russia and all those who are not involved directly in US — China disagreements and disputes before a difficult choice. To prevent the movement towards a bipolar international system, fraught with the above-mentioned dangers, concerted efforts are required from all those interested in implementing a different concept of international relations. Perhaps, these efforts could lead to noticeable results precisely in Eurasia.

<sup>19</sup> Zhao H. Eurasian Integration: Adaptation to New Realities // Valdai International Discussion Club. July 16, 2020. (In Russian). URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/evraziyskaya-integratsiya-adaptatsiya/> (accessed: 24.12.2024).

<sup>20</sup> Shah A. Russia Loosens Its Belt // Foreign Policy. July 16, 2020. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/16/russia-china-belt-and-road-initiative/> (accessed: 12.11.2024).

## **Instead of a Conclusion: Towards a New World Order in Eurasia**

In general, our hypothesis about the growth of global conflict in the world is confirmed by the development of competition between the United States and China, their growing mutual distrust and inability to smooth out fundamental differences in understanding the principles of a just world order. As a result, bipolar relations are strengthening in the international system.

However, the growth of conflict relations on a global scale is not accompanied by similar processes at all regional levels. The future of the international system remains uncertain, since the main participants in international relations are still far from aligning their interests. In particular, in Eurasia, the positions of the largest countries, which are in principle interested in avoiding confrontation and bipolarization of the international system, collide. Active efforts are needed to develop pan-regional projects, as well as to formulate a common vision of Eurasia as an open space for inter-civilizational, economic and political interaction between the countries of Asia and Europe.

Although the trend of international cooperation in Eurasia cannot be called either irreversible or dominant, four factors speak in favor of its future development — the started intellectual work on developing a common idea of cooperation, maintaining the military-political balance, the gradual formation of a new institutional architecture and the presence of compatible interests in the region that enhance economic interdependence. These factors are not yet strong enough, but under certain conditions they could contribute to strengthening international cooperation in Eurasia. To achieve this, the most influential countries in the region should strengthen their willingness to resolve disputes through dialogue and within the framework of existing multilateral institutions.

An encouraging development from the point of view of international cooperation is the work on formulating a common idea that motivates cooperation. In the long term, the existence of



such an idea would facilitate inter-civilizational interaction in Eurasia and strengthen the common rules of international order in the region. So far, Russia and its community of international relations experts have been the most active in developing such an idea. The Russian concept of “Greater Eurasia” was put forward within the *Valdai Club* and presents the Eurasian space as an area stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, where Russia, China and other civilizations build international rules based on economic and political cooperation and respect for each other’s independence.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, it seems that Europe, China, Iran and some other countries are less inclined to recognize Eurasia as a region of independent significance and, therefore, have little interest in developing ideas or rules for its development.

Russian experts present Eurasia as a space relatively free for commercial and financial transactions, and the EAEU as an important platform for the development of the region and its multilateral institutions. According to this understanding, Russia should promote the integration of the region as a whole, similar to how France promoted the integration of Europe at its early stage (Bordachev, 2019). In other words, Russia is seen as a cultural, economic, and political bridge necessary for the smooth functioning of this complex region. However, to ensure such a role, *it is necessary for Russia to maintain its sovereignty and status as a great power*. Since the mid-2000s, many Russian scholars have viewed Russia as a Eurasian power in a multipolar world, responsible for

maintaining the regional and global balance of power (Utkin, 2006; Gadzhiev, 2011; Nikonov, 2015; Pantin & Lapkin, 2018; Shakleina, 2017; 2023). It is assumed that instead of striving for regional hegemony, Russia should help prevent the hegemony of others by developing its status as a special geoeconomic power, thanks to which strategic industrial and transport projects operate (Diesen, 2019).

The second factor contributing to the cooperation is associated with *maintaining the balance of power in the region* and the inability of any power to violate it. Russia’s use of force is not associated with the desire to form a hegemonic regime in the region, but with the desire to exclude Western countries from ignoring its security interests. The Russian leadership has repeatedly stressed the importance of creating a common security system in Europe and Eurasia, which would take into account the interests of all participants in the region and exclude the expansion of the Western military-political infrastructure at the expense of the interests of other countries. The absence of intentions and opportunities to change the military-power balance, on the one hand, and a gradual movement towards military-political institutionalization in the region, on the other, could contribute to maintaining peace and security in Greater Eurasia as an environment for the development of cooperation. It is important that Russia is developing military cooperation not only with China, but also with India, Iran, North Korea and other countries. Ideally, such institutionalization would integrate the interests of all major countries in the region.

The third factor in maintaining and potentially developing cooperation is the gradual formation of a new institutional architecture in the region. Step by step, new structures for coordinating interests are emerging here at the initiative of Russia and China: the EAEU, the Chinese BRI and the SCO. It is also important that a number of major countries in the region are united in large international formats of interaction outside the region, and the most important is BRICS+.

<sup>21</sup> See: Karaganov S., Bordachev T. Forward to the Great Ocean – 6: People, History, Ideology, Education. The Path to Oneself // Valdai International Discussion Club. September 11, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/reports/vperedy-k-velikomuoceanu-6/?ysclid=m5le99q0bt828309059> (accessed: 20.12.2024); Lissovolik Ya. “Operational Space” as an Imperative of Russian Foreign Policy // Valdai International Discussion Club. August 12, 2020. (In Russian). URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/operativnyy-prostor-kak-imperativ-rossiyskoy-politiki/> (accessed: 24.12.2024). See also: (Karaganov, 2019; Suslov & Piatachkova, 2019).

These formats are still in their early stages of development, they poorly coordinate interactions with each other and often reflect the interests of some powers significantly more than others and are therefore not capable of fully coordinating interests. At the same time, this should not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle to their rapprochement. Let us remember that the development of the organization of European states, known today as the European Union, was neither smooth nor rapid.

Finally, the fourth factor of cooperation *is the development of economic interdependence and, on its basis, common interests* in maintaining the openness of Eurasia. In the conditions of a significant conflict of civilizational and military-political interests, the presence of the factor of economic interdependence cannot maintain relations on the trajectory of cooperation. The development of the conflict between Russia and Europe over Ukraine is the best evidence. Deep economic and energy ties between the parties were severed as a result of the conflict.

However, in the presence of inter-civilizational understanding and a mutually recognized military-political balance, economic interdependence is undoubtedly capable to deepen international cooperation. Under certain conditions, such interdependence can contribute to the resolution of military-political issues. For example, Russia's sanctions against Türkiye in response to the strike on a Russian aircraft in Syria in 2015 initially deepened the crisis in relations between the two countries, but then led to an apology from the Turkish side for what happened and a desire to rectify the situation. Another example is related to the relatively high degree of dependence of Belarus on the Russian economy. The presence of such dependence contributed to the fact that with the beginning of

the Russian SMO in Ukraine, Minsk increased the level of allied relations with Moscow.

In general, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, economic interdependence between Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran and other countries of the Eurasian region has grown significantly and has become a factor in regional stabilization. However, if before the beginning of the Russian SMO in Ukraine, relations in the region were largely focused on Europe, then subsequently they noticeably shifted towards building relations between Russia and non-European countries. In general, Eurasia as a region has yet to create sustainable universal rules of economic interaction.

The Russian Federation could play a special role in the formation of a multipolar order in Eurasia as a prototype of the future world order. The conditions for this exist. The Russian economy is traditionally semi-peripheral in nature, but has special export capabilities, intellectual capital and potential for technological growth. The Russian Federation is a powerful military power capable of stimulating interregional dialogue on security issues and preventing the development of a trend to create a new hegemony in the region. Russia is located on most of the territory of Eurasia, which determines unprecedented transport and logistics opportunities for the communication and economic unification of the region. Finally, Russia historically interacted with both European and Asian nations and played a special role in establishing inter-civilizational communication and dialogue. The energy of Russian specialists in international relations should be directed at mobilizing all this capital for regional development, both in terms of developing their own theories and constantly comparing them with the theories of neighboring countries.

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