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The Russian view of high turbulence times

The new cold war between Russia and the West has been mostly waged by the active use of propaganda tools, leading, after five years of reciprocally imposed sanctions, to a situation where the parties practically stopped hearing each other. As we know from historical experience, political deafness sooner or later leads to conflict.

Chaos appears to be the main characteristic defining the current process: that is to say that, while no one is in control, even ordinary people or organized groups can have a great influence on politics and take advantage of such an unpredictable situation. It is a new age of turmoil.

Many Russian experts are convinced that a new global conflict is inevitable, with the USA and Russia as main actors and China playing a supporting role to Moscow, if nothing changes. This prevision derives from the actions taken by the authorities of both countries that have an aggressive behaviour and are actively using the tool of sanctions, not to mention propaganda and fake news. This behaviour is increasingly compromising the reliability of information and replacing facts with stories. Moreover, the situation is worsened by two other aspects: firstly, each party requires the adoption of only its own point of view, making compromise impossible; secondly, nostalgia of the past is equally affecting Moscow and Washington, defining an even more complicated relation between the two countries.

The current American administration is trying to exempt the United States from all existing international agreements and at the same time block the creation of new ones. This example leads other countries at fulfilling only those obligations in which they are interested, as it happens for instance with several countries vis-à-vis the obligations of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Washington seems generally convinced that non-proliferation treaties are not written in stone and the world will not come to an end due to their non-compliance because they have been overcome by technological breakthroughs in ultra-precise hypersonic weapons.

If one looks at the overall global economic situation, many specialists believe that there are structural parallels with the past Great Depression, an alarming detail since that economic turmoil gave way to the Second World War. Clearly the current cause of conflicts is fundamentally different from those times and there is no more superpower competition as well. There is, instead of an ideological confrontation, a competition between capitalist groups, unfolding not only in the Euro-Atlantic area, but also in Asia with China as a full-scale actor.

The destruction of the usual foundations of security takes place against the backdrop of the inability of the existing institutions to resist this process. Hence the distrust towards them, expressed mostly as hate against political parties and political elites. The growing influence of nationalist ideas and organizations gives way to a new form of nationalism, in the form of “neo-tribalism” – the loyalty of a spirit close to the social community, with political parties trying to comply with this sentiment and gain consensus.

This neo-tribalism is exacerbated by the political entanglements between Russia and the USA, especially regarding the electoral process, because this represents a toxic political element for the current US administration and bilateral relationships with Russia. Without these two actors restoring some order in their dealings, also other regions are exposed to disorder, as one can see in the Middle East.

When there is no cooperation and in absence of an active dialogue between Moscow and Washington, non-state actors are activated, capable of provoking open conflicts, increase in number and are the subject of ominous mutations. As one may see, “hybrid” semi-state structures emerged, with access to national resources, but unburdened by most state’s responsibilities. Needless to say, for the UN it is extremely difficult to act as a mediator.

That said, not all is lost precisely because, in addition the Middle East, also Southeast Asia can serve as renewed platform for collaboration. In the Middle East this cooperation existed against the Islamic State, once Washington realised that its overconfidence in its military means had created in Iraq a source of instability instead of a new regional order, requiring a temporary collaboration with Moscow. In Southeast Asia Washington could avoid costly confrontations, if it would pragmatically avail itself of the Russian mediation in a dialogue with China, while consolidating an alliance in the Middle East.

In this new arrangement Europe could play a more constructive role in the eyes of several Russian political thinkers. Firstly, the idea to use the EU to limit the importance of Russia is not appreciated any more by several member states, already embroiled in a complicated Brexit and an almost impossible further enlargement. Secondly, several parties in Europe do not understand any more the benefits of NATO’s expansion too, because it means incorporating smaller countries with the result of alienating bigger ones. Thirdly, the US sanctions are continuously eroding not only the competitiveness of European

companies but questioning also national sovereignty in EU countries with regards to the freedom of entertaining relations with important international partners.

Russian analysts are not surprised that in Brussels there is some serious thought about creating a European defence, something clearly not supported by the current Administration in the White House; the very same Administration that casts open doubts on NATO itself. To escape this conundrum, these analysts believe that the United States need to improve trade relations with Europe first of all, then military and economic relations with Moscow, before Russia, by inertia and lack of alternatives, comes too close to China.

The United States fear that China will surpass them in the economic (thanks also to extensive relations and business penetrations in Europe) and armaments sectors, and, even worse, in technological prowess. There is a triangular new cold war between USA, Russia and China with Europe in the middle: in Washington some decision-makers believe that Moscow is the element that could make the difference in the correlation of forces with Beijing.

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