RUSSIA BETWEEN WEST AND EAST

Problem of Russia’s being between West and East has two dimensions. Firstly, it the problem of Russia’s identity, and its place in the world as part of the West or East, or as a separate civilization, Russia’s policy on global and regional levels. Secondly, it is the problem of new world order formation, and the role that different countries play in it.

Adherents of the first approach – of “Eurasian” or “European-Asian” status and strategy - pay special attention to the fact that the Russian Federation is a qualitatively new territorial and political entity that is in the process of its self-identification. They

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In the paper we analyze Eurasian concept applied to foreign policy by those representatives of academic and political community whose views are defined as “centrist”. Their “Eurasian strategy” is not identical to the Eurasian philosophic theory based on the assumption of unique geopolitical and cultural role of Russia that requires a corresponding strategy. They suggest using the term “European-Asian” instead of “Eurasian” that has a strong negative connotation. The principal thinker and leader of “Eurasian party” is A. Dugin, and though he is invited to consult members of government and parliament, we cannot say that his views had a dramatic effect on official decision making. See, for instance: Dugin A. Geopolitics: Geopolitical Future of Russia. M., 1999.
understand as the biggest task for contemporary Russia to conceptually explain change and historic continuity in its identity, and work out a proper strategy different from the Soviet one. Most of political analysts indicated that besides certain difficulties with identity change and hardships of domestic reconstruction after 1991, geopolitical situation for Russia changed for the worse. It not only lost part of its territory in Europe and Asia, but its role of “the center” of the Eurasian continent changed: there appeared new challenges to its security and its regional role. Russia became more vulnerable to outer threats that came closer to its territory. Such geopolitical situation demanded strictly correlated strategy aimed at diminishing existing and potential challenges, giving Russia time to restore its political and economic status, and preventing loss of Eurasian “heartland” role.

Proponents of Eurasian or European-Asian strategy give the following arguments in favor of Eurasian choice: 1) Russia is “a bridge” between Europe and Asia; it has a unique geopolitical status which should be used most effectively and beneficially for its national interests; 2) the key factor for keeping its great power status is economy, and Eurasian model is optimum for the country and its reconstruction; 3) Eurasian model allows to develop principal directions of Russian foreign policy: European, Asian and North American.

Followers of Eurasian model point out that in the first years of Russia’s independent foreign policy (1992-1994) its identity was defined as “country of the West” which practically nobody in the Western world and very few in Russia itself could explain. The result of this approach was debatable: Russia failed to build bilateral “strategic (equal) partnership” with the U.S. while relations with other countries were underestimated or neglected. As critics pointed out, Russia, a unique world power situated and having vital interests both in Europe and Asia, found itself in isolation from the mainstream of financial and economic integration processes. However its survival and prosperity could be possible only in case its neighbors in the West (Euro-Atlantic community) and in the East (Asia-Pacific community) turn to cooperation and partnership with Russia. Only then Russia could obtain a visible and important role in world economy. The most important benefits from this position of a “connecting bridge” are expected in economic sphere – as financial, transport, information, trade flows go through Russia, drawing it into interaction and cooperation with Eurasian countries. This position will allow Russia not only to participate but also to regulate the flows making Russia an integrating force in the process.

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This scenario is a very desirable one but hardly achievable in the nearest future. Its realization and success depend not only on Russia’s choice and ability to achieve goals but also on the compatibility of Russian interests and interests of other regional actors and global actors which control economic and other flows in Europe and Asia-Pacific. It means that Eurasian (European-Asian) strategy is a very ambitious strategy compatible to a civilizational one. It is this ambition and grandeur of aim that arouses some doubts and critic.

Opponents of Eurasian strategy reject the idea that Russia’s great power status is envisaged by its position as a geopolitical “bridge” between Europe and Asia. They define such an assumption a “myth” because the concept is not based on real facts: Russia does not have communication system, economic base, resources and clearly defined strategy to fulfill this role of a bridge or to pursue a special (civilizational) way of development. So, Eurasian strategy is impossible to fulfill

Critics of Eurasian approach state that Russia is a European country by its origin and culture, and this is a fact not subject to any discussion. Russia is a geographic East, but not a civilizational one. According to a liberal view Russia cannot (and should not) be “conciliatory” and “connecting”, it must not be a “Eurasian civilizational and power balancer” envisaging a dialogue of cultures, civilizations and states.

Though views of adherents of two schools of thought seem incompatible they reflect a complex nature of Russian state and its policy. They contradict on a number of points but they also compliment each other.

Speaking about nature of the Russian state – European or Eurasian – it is necessary to point out that Russian civilization is defined by the majority of philosophers and political scientists in Russia and the West as a separate civilization distinguished from European and Eastern-Moslem. So Russia, strictly speaking, cannot be defined as a European country. Being an independent civilizational entity complicates Russia’s existence and behavior but does not exclude successful interaction with European and Asian countries.

Not rejecting Eurasian strategy in principle, we cannot fully accept the idea of Russia as a “civilizational bridge” (or balancer). The prospect of a “Eurasian balancer” is hardly suitable for Russia as such a role is potentially dangerous for the country and can bring instability. Critics are right that Russia cannot risk, cannot overburden itself because its primary goal is to finish successfully political and economic reforms. What seems understandable and reasonable is Russia as an “economic bridge” when Russia can have benefits and sustain cooperation with many countries.

Geopolitically and civilizationally Russia will be more comfortable remaining a distinct civilization (not just a combination of European and Asian entities) without being torn or balancing between Europe and Asia but seeking most suitable forms of dealing with other actors of international process.

Acknowledgement of complex civilizational nature of Russia means recognition of a global nature of its international behavior though restricted as compared to globalism of American policy. In contemporary context such a choice anticipates that the Russian Federation remains a great world power actively involved in formation and regulation of a new world order.

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Proponents of this view consider it incorrect and useless to discuss where interests are more important for Russia: in Europe or in Asia. They point out that such an approach is wrong as it denies distinct European-Asian character of Russia’s identity presupposing its global nature, and limit Russia’s status to a regional one that is not consistent with Russian history and culture. They conclude that Russia cannot withdraw completely from world regulation and cannot have one-dimensional policy oriented to the West or to the East. Such approach will be the end of historic Russia. For contemporary Russia it does not mean reverting to imperial Russia but reviving traditional Russian policy “bridging” identity gap that has existed since 1990.

Critics define such views as contradicting Russian vital interests. They consider it necessary to subordinate foreign policy to domestic priorities: “Priorities of real but not transcendental Russia are quite simple but important for its citizens: medical care, education, science. They can be fully solved only after Russia gets rid of its imperial burden and concentrate on its internal problems. It has a historic chance to solve problems that were “postponed” because Russia was pursuing a global strategy demanding all resources and lives of its citizens. It needs to finish building its democratic system, restructuring its economic system. The challenge to contemporary Russia they see not in possible loss of its geopolitical status but in failure to build a democratic and prosperous society that will allow finding a new place in the world.

Such an approach envisages that Russia needs to follow the lead of one of the main world players. Some scholars name the United States, others speak for the European Union that is geopolitically and culturally closer to Russia and is not interested in further growth of American global power. Whether such a choice will bring Russia a lot of economic benefits and envisage its secure and stable development remains questionable. Till present hopes for greater advantages from the loss of status have been rather vague. It seems that the best option for Russia is incorporation in world politics with keeping continuity and leverage to its historic traditions and positive diplomatic achievements; behaving actively and pragmatically at American and European directions.

The problem of “identity vs. strategy” is still on the agenda of political debates in Russia. Both approaches to foreign policy have its logic and arguments, both want Russia to be a prosperous democratic country. However we have to acknowledge that

Russia cannot postpone either its domestic problems or its foreign policy tasks. It will have to solve domestic and not domestic problems – at least to try – in the framework of one strategy, and this is a civilizational challenge for contemporary Russia. Success inside will create more favorable opportunities for its activities abroad, and positive achievements in foreign policy will support domestic reforms.

The choice of Russia will be determined by the decision made by the government and people of the country. At present the answer is in the Russian foreign policy doctrine where it is said that Russia is a great world power, and for the nearest future this choice will be influencing Russia’s efforts in the world and inside the country.

Strategic aim of contemporary Russia is to optimize its role in the world using its resources and geopolitical position despite unfavorable outer and inner conditions; to try to exert influence on the process on new world order formation and remain an active and influential actor in world politics. As President Putin said, for the first time in 200-300 years Russia is challenged by possibility to lose its great power status and become a country of minor importance: “To prevent it we need to concentrate all intellectual, physical and moral resources of the nation. Nobody will solve this problem for us. Everything depends on our ability to realize the danger, to unite and be ready to work hard”\(^\text{13}\).

Debates between proponents of Eurasian and European identity and corresponding foreign policies (great power or ordinary power) continue. In case the choice for a great power role remains and prevails Russia will be acting as a Eurasian country in Europe, Asia and with North America\(^\text{14}\). It will also remain an active participant in world order construction.

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Russia’s belonging to the West or to the East in contemporary international relations requires clarification for a number of reasons: 1) categories of “West” and “East” have overcome changes; 2) other categories of division suggested by scholars reflect changes in international relations and in the status of certain countries closer to reality; 3) discussion of Russia’s place in world politics requires analysis and estimation of contemporary tendencies in constructing new world order.

Before we define to what group of countries Russia belongs, it is necessary to clarify what is “West” and “East” now, how they correlate to categories of “North” and “South”; how they reflect realities of globalization.

There are different opinions. Some specialists in international relations state that the division of the world to “West” and “East”, “North” and “South” remains. Among them there are two groups: of those who do not see any changes and equate “West” with the old “concert of great powers” or Group 7; and of those who think that we are dealing with a new enlarged “concert” whose members belong to geopolitical West and East.

\(^{13}\) Putin V. Russia on the Threshold of a New Century // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. 1999, December 30.

Proponents of the first view state that there have not been real systemic changes: the great division of the world remains its most vivid characteristic, and despite the end of the cold war, relations between highly industrialized countries that have similar interests and common desire to defend their preferential interests in all spheres remain very similar to those during the bipolar world. Professors of political science from the Michigan University M. Ayoob and M. Zierler state that though the United States is the only world superpower, have the highest unchallengeable status, relations between countries of “old transatlantic core” have not dramatically changed, though linier structure of this core is different. This idea is not quite new though presented in a different context. Ch. Kupchan, I. Wallerstein and other scholars wrote about “complex core” or complex nature of one polar in post-Cold War world where in its linier structure the U.S. is the strongest center of power.

One has to acknowledge that such an opinion contains a great deal of truth, especially when we discuss American global strategy and its present realization. There is not sincerely expressed desire to change the notion of a “new core”, or “new bigger concert” with China, Russia, India and some other countries included. Tendency to keep a restricted “club” or “old concert” is quite visible. However de facto such a new core is already existing and acting, though de jure it is not acknowledged by all old concert-members, and is not organized in anything like Group 7 or Security Council. Contemporary Russia views itself as part of this “new concert”, but it is not the West in its old meaning. And it is not traditional North either with Russia and China being great Eurasian and Asian powers.

Despite existing differences in economic, political, military, intellectual, informational characteristics, The United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China, India, Canada, Japan (and even Iran, Pakistan, Brazil) have to look at each other, negotiate and cooperate, make decisions aimed at solving global and regional problems. There are criticism, disagreements, even crises, but so far certain status quo in international relations has been kept. The base of this status quo are norms and institutions established in the last century (though under modification) and transformation), as we mentioned above. Global threats and interests of survival and stability prevent different members of “new concert” from complete dissolution and rejection of cooperation. In the present international situation the United States look the main force preventing consolidation of this new world core.

Understanding arbitrary character of West-East and North-South division, scholars suggest a new approach reflecting new configuration of powers in the world and manifestations of globalization. Some of them preserve the “old West” category – most developed industrialized countries or “golden billion” (Group 7 or transatlantic core countries), and supplement it with the group of “transition countries” – the most numerous that includes Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Mexico, Brazil, Central European countries, Baltic states, Ukraine, CIS countries. The third group are “failed states”. According to this concept the first group will be enlarging with countries from the “transition level” that will succeed in political and economic reforms, and will accept Western (American) values and institutions.


This concept gives a more correct estimation of the distribution of powers and perspectives of further changes in international system, however it does not give an answer to the question about world order and sustaining stable development. The second group is very heterogeneous, contradictory, part of them belong to NATO, EU, OSCE, WTO and have privileges in getting Western assistance; there is also great diversity in their economic and geopolitical potential, and they have very different ability and will to participate in regional and world regulation. Successful development of the world system according to this concept is possible only on the condition that The United States and other countries of the “golden billion” will be more thoughtful and generous toward the rest of the world, and “transitional countries” will demonstrate strong adherence to democracy of the Western type. The prognosis is rather problematic. Till present moment it hasn’t worked because Russia’s role as well as role of other “new great powers” in formation of new world order has been neglected.

More true to real trends in world development is another concept that combines the idea of “enlarged concert” – core of contemporary world, and broader (and more tolerant) approach to the rest of the world.

The fact that different scholars are speaking about “collective or enlarged core (concert)” tells us that changes in the world are becoming irreversible, and we cannot stick to the idea that “the old concert” with the superpower in the middle (or at the top) can fully manage world development. This view does not deny possibility of keeping “western cohesion” in defending and promoting interests of Group 7 countries, but constrains policy of overall control of international development. It also does not deny the idea of American leadership, making it harder to perform and demanding more compromise on the part of the superpower, but making its mission greater and more prestigious.

I would say that the world is already being managed by a “new core” acting on the basis of partly modified old status quo, and this instinctive behavior together with objective factor of self-preservation intrinsic for the international system (governed anarchy) have been keeping the world from destabilization.

In case the United States and other members of “old core” accept the reality, the “new core” will constitute the majority of the world - the most developed and striving to cooperation, democratization and globalization with the population of 4 billion out of 6 billion of people living on the Earth. American expert Th. Barnett suggests to include into the “functioning core” already mentioned the United States, Canada, EU, Russia, Japan, China, India, and also Australia and New Zealand, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, Chile. The rest of the world is defined as non-integrating “gap”, and that is not equal to “evil states” as among countries of the gap there are not only states not willing to integrate and to develop non-confrontationally, but also states willing but unable to globalize (due to economic, cultural, or other factors). So, orientation toward globalization, incorporation into contemporary system is chosen as criteria for building relations inside the functioning core, and between the core and the rest of the world (not yet globalized).

Until the “old concert”, first of all, the United States, accepts this fact, there will be difficulties in world governance, opposition to globalization in general and to methods of its realization, a possibility of instability growth, and deepening of

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disagreements between leading world powers (acknowledged and not acknowledged). One of the main criticisms is that globalization is used by Group of 7 countries as a “smoke-screen” for control of resources and power flows in the world, for promotion of interests of countries of “golden billion”, for keeping the gap between the old “West” and the rest of the world19.

Persistence in rejecting objective trends in international development already brought serious disagreements in relations between Russia and the United States, China and the U.S., EU and Russia, etc., and what is more important - caused asymmetric reaction from the “gap”. There is a dangerous illusion that military force, weapons of mass destruction are the only means to defend from the most powerful states not willing to accept other cultures, models of development, and they are suspected in trying to keep less developed countries as “resource territories”.

One more idea that deserves more attention is the attitude on the part of “old concert-members” toward the rest of the world that is not homogeneous: there are more and less economically developed countries, and “more or less democratic” countries (though this definition is not quite correct). How to treat them: encourage and help with or without criticism, reject and refuse any cooperation and help? It seems that a more realistic and productive way is to approach and cooperate when and where possible. This way does not exclude interaction at various levels, different ways and levels of criticism. This approach, to my mind, corresponds better to global character of existing problems (threats and challenges): terrorism, WMD proliferation, migration, drug and people trafficking, epidemics, ecology, catastrophes.

One more question that deserves attention is the question of sovereignty and the right to neglect or violate it. It is a very touchy topic for the majority of the world community, especially for countries outside the old and even the new “core”. Countries are at different level of maturing as nation-states, for them sovereignty is a precious factor and necessary attribute of their statehood. Problem of state sovereignty requires serious and legally based solution. Double standard in this question is the point of constant criticism of the United States and their allies while many of them do not worry about their sovereignty as they have its guarantees from the superpower (and NATO).

Russia sees itself as part of the new “functioning core”. It is striving for better political system, trying to incorporate into the world economic and financial system. It is ready (and able) to participate in solution of many global and regional problems together with global and regional actors. Being geographically situated in two continents, having borders with a great number of countries with different regimes, at different levels of economic, political, cultural development, being historically tied with many cultures and traditions – Russia has to have multi-dimensional policy. As any other country it has interests and must defend and promote it with the same methods and means that are used by other countries of the “old core” and the rest of the world (and these means are not ideal).

Russia recognizes that in contemporary world many problems become global and can be solved only by collective approach. From this point of view Russia, though not a superpower and without aspirations to exert global influence (like it was during cold war when the USSR pursued policy of global influence and interference), will have global component in its international strategy as a participant in creation of new world order (institutions, norms) together with other actors. All other leading world powers

also can strengthen global component in their policy in perspective (for instance, China, EU as a collective center of world power).

Russia’s geostrategic position – center of Eurasia – defines its “new globalism” as well. Security and economic problems in relations between Russia, CIS countries and other Asian countries are not only of continental but also of global character: many of Eurasian states are in the oil and terrorist network, are territories where interests of many countries meet (the Unites States is one of them). Russia cannot ignore territories to the South and to the East, as most of them are already unstable or might be unstable in the future, require constant attention and involvement in the regional situation to envisage stability on Russian borders. Growing threat of terrorism, drug and arms trafficking, WMD proliferation is making Asian vector of Russian foreign policy very important and challenging. To accuse Russia of “imperial interference” into life and policy of Eurasian countries is not justified.

Post-Soviet states have become the field of geopolitical game where economic, security and ideological interests of various powers came into collision, and where the United States are the most powerful and active player, and potentially the most beneficial in getting positive results. However competition is a normal thing, and different players will get different benefits or losses. Russia is one of them.

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Contemporary international relations demonstrate that their regulation and solution of global problems is not the task for one country even a superpower. It is hardly an easy challenge for a group of leading world powers if they do not find an optimum concept and means of collective approach to dilemmas of the 21st century.

Domestic problems and complicated international surroundings determine a civilizational and geopolitical choice for Russia. It needs to build up a strong economic and political basis to survive as a civilization and a state. This task requires favorable geopolitical conditions that do not allow any confrontation or balancing between different centers of power. Being part of the “concert of powers” where the United States, EU, Russia, China and some other countries belong does not promise an easy future. At least Russia has a chance of maneuvering and using opportunities it has being European and Asian, regional and global, international and national. Democratization of international relations and policies of the leading countries, closer incorporation into globalizing world will exert influence on its behavior. So, perfection is a bilateral process as it is viewed by Russia and other countries entering and acting as members of the “new functioning core” responsible for stable development, incorporation of non-globalizing “gap” and making the world really democratic. 