

ON MODERN GEOPOLITICAL PLURALISM OR ONE-NATION HEGEMONISM

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The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations, so many people believed, opened up unprecedented opportunities for restructuring the world on the basis of general human values and interests. The world community has, it would seem, received a unique historical chance for the formation of a new international order on just legal principles, and to enter the new century and millennium free from the past legacy of confrontation.

The threats of a new order of international relations have replaced the threats and contradictions of the bipolar world, dominated by Soviets and Americans. In fact, threats to security may even be accentuated in the condition of greater interdependence of states. The stability of many countries and whole regions is shaken by conflicts connected with interethnic and interconfessional tensions, religious extremism, and aggressive separatism. The danger of proliferation of nuclear and other types of weapons of

mass destruction and their means of delivery is particularly menacing. The gap between the poor and the rich countries does not shrink. Whilst the ecological and climatic equilibrium of the planet is being violated, the U.S. withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol can make this international initiative less effective. The narcotics trade has grown, as has organized crime, which has increasingly crossed national frontiers and assumed truly global proportions.

The course of international developments was indeed greatly impacted by the end of the “bipolar system.” States not only found themselves less well protected against the old “diseases,” but faced the new ones too. Crucially, adequate mechanisms to ensure international stability in the face of these new changes were not created.

This essay will explain geopolitical dynamics in Eurasia, assess whether Mackinder’s Heartland thesis can be used to shed light on them, and ask what lessons foreign policy planners in the Central Asian region can derive from this.

In saecula saeculorum (Forever and ever)

Today Eurasia is the key arena of international politics, by virtue both of its significance in the modern world and the role that it will play in determining the contours of future scenarios. This assertion can be validated with reference to the goals, tasks and priorities of the foreign policy of the United States, set out annually in a White House publication. Since 1997 this report has been published under the title, "A National Strategy for a New Century."¹

The chief premise, from which the United States proceeds in the formulation of its national strategy, is the recognition of the instability of the present-day world, the existence of threats to the security of both itself and its allies, and the challenge they present to America's world domination. The report notes that the balance of power in the world is subject to constant changes, is unstable, and is fraught with various threats. One such threat is seen in the instability of a number of regions of the world, in which certain countries have the possibility of inflicting damage to the national interests of the United States. "These countries," says the document, "threaten the sovereignty of their neighbors, economic stability and international access to natural resources."²

Such an estimate logically leads White House analysts to conclude on the necessity of tough counteraction to the enumerated threats, and also of active participation in the solution of international problems and maintaining its leading edge in economic, political, military, communicational, and other spheres: "The United States must lead the world, if we intend to ensure security inside the country... We cannot implement our leading role, if we do not allocate the necessary resources for supporting our military, diplomatic, intelligence and other efforts. We must be ready to make use of all necessary means of national might for exerting influence on other states and nongovernmental subjects of international relations in view of ensuring our global leadership and preservation of our status of a reliable ally in the field of security for countries sharing our interests."³

At the same time, the United States does not deny itself the right to act alone, "when this answers to the maximum the interests of the course pursued by it or when there is no other alternative." Because this right, it should be understood, is appropriated exclusively by the United States, the allied obligations and consultations are in fact reduced to zero in the case of especially serious conflicts in the world.

In addition, it is possible to note one more important provision, appearing in almost all documents and materials in which the present-day interests of the United States are considered and formulated. Here we have in mind that the number of vital interests of the U.S. invariably comprises an item on the prevention of the emergence of a regional hegemon (leader) in the regions considered most important to the U.S. That this invariably occurs in such documents is striking.⁴ In particular, it is informed by a fear of the upsetting of the balance of power away from its favor on the vast expanses of Eurasia. It should be noted that some analysts regard this disease of "hegemonism," from which the United States is suffering, as one of the causes of international terrorism aimed against it. The United States has been largely successful in creating the appearance of a pyramid for the process of globalization. At its peak is the United States proper, and below this a group of states making up seven of the

¹ See: *A National Strategy for a New Century*, The White House, Washington, D.C., May 1997, October 1998, December 1999.

² *A National Strategy for a New Century*, December 1999, p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ See, for example: *America's National Interests*, A Report from the Commission on America's National Interests, Center for Science and International Affairs, Cambridge; John Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, July 1996, pp. 2-4, 21, 22; July 2000, p. 6.

most industrially developed countries of the world. Below these is a group of average countries like Spain, and at the foot of the pyramid are the remaining states, comprising about nine tenths of humanity's total population. They are permitted only to make some improvements in their standards of living, but otherwise have been assigned the role of raw material suppliers for the upper layers of the pyramid, a dumping ground for waste, and a market for stale goods. It is clear that such a model of globalization cannot but cause a counter reaction, and terrorism is but one of the forms of its manifestation.

We have dwelt in detail on the national interests of the United States for the reason that it is today the only superpower in the world, and stability in the system of international relations hangs in many ways on its policies. On the whole, everything said above provides sufficiently convincing evidence, in our opinion, that today, just like in previous times, statesmen, in the words of H. Morgenthau, "*think and act in the notions of interest determined as power.*"⁵ Such a way of thinking cannot be altered by any transformations and changes in the world.

The correctness of these words can be seen not only on the example of the United States, for which the problem of national interest has become a kind of an *idée fixe*, but also in the case of other states and, first of all, those which have recently become independent. Here Russia is no exception, showing a keen interest in the elaboration of her own national interest, especially since Vladimir Putin's 1999 victory at the presidential elections. However, in one vital sense there exists a marked difference between these two states. Whereas the United States is at the zenith of its might, Russia is a state weakened by years of thoughtless, hasty and destructive "restructuring" and reforms, which have actually resulted in the degeneration of the state and the reduction in its ability to direct the political, economic and social life of the country. It is not merely that this has resulted in the weakening of national self-consciousness. It has also caused the destruction of the moral foundations of society, in an uncontrolled growth of crime, corruption, arbitrariness, and the reckless promotion of self-interest, which has seized not only the lower and middle strata of society, but also the ruling elite. The authorities are faced with a national and political vacuum—the vacuum of national self-consciousness, a crisis facing not just Russians in Russia proper, but those in other regions.

What was formerly a single nation was suddenly divided into a plethora of loosely-linked ethnic and national regional formations. This involved the emergence of conflicts on the basis of aggressive nationalism and the prioritization of local interests—of which Chechnia is the most vivid example. Amongst the intelligentsia, one could observe the development of rootless cosmopolitanism, the loss of a concern for the motherland, frustration, pessimism, lack of faith in the possibility of constructive changes, and a wholesale criticism of all and everything. The instability of the internal and external political, economic, and military-strategic situation rendered attempts to devise grand plans to revive the national interest at worst futile, and at best abstract intellectual exercises. This whole process was accompanied on the part of the majority of the population by political apathy, indifference to state affairs, and the development of egotistical interest.⁶

The main features of these changes are connected with the departure from the world arena of the Soviet Union as a superpower, the disintegration of its colossal sphere of influence, the emergence in its place of new independent states, and regional political crises. These include the crises in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans, and the conflict in Kosovo, and the armed intervention in these places by Western powers led by the United States. As the United States has promoted its hegemony, ever more serious challenges to it arise from the world periphery. One manifestation of these is international

⁵ H.J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 4th edition, New York, 1967, p. 5.

⁶ In this sense let us make reference to the collection of topical articles prepared by a group of well-known political scientists and economists under the common and pretentious title *Natsional'naya doktrina Rossii (problemy i priority)* (Russia's National Doctrine (Problems and Priorities)), The Obozrevatel agency, Moscow, 1994. Judging by everything, it remained undesirable, just like other such works.

terrorism. In this light the events in Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002 are of principal importance. The epoch-making changes concern many regions and subregions. But, perhaps, central in this respect today is the Eurasian continental massif ("heart-shaped land," or "Heartland," according to the definition of Sir Halford Mackinder). It is namely here today that the most significant geopolitical changes take place, which will influence the destiny of the whole world in the 21st century. It is the now-independent former republics of the Soviet Union that have turned out to be at the center of these changes, including Uzbekistan. It is namely in that region today that an antiterrorist campaign has been launched, in which in one way or another many states of the world are involved.

The geopolitical changes that have taken place compel responsible politicians and statesmen to rethink their understandings of what is going on in the present-day world. Today Eurasia is the key arena of international politics, by virtue both of its significance in the modern world and the role that it will play in determining the contours of the future world. The veteran politician Zbigniew Brzezinski was one of the first to draw the attention of American leaders to the geopolitical changes that have taken place, and their significance for the national interest of the United States. He has well learnt the lessons of Mackinder, particularly that Eurasia is not simply the largest continent on the globe, but occupies an axial position on it: "A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions. A mere glance at the map also suggests that control over Eurasia would almost automatically entail Africa's subordination, rendering the Western Hemisphere and Oceania geopolitically peripheral to the world's central continent."⁷

Nearly 75% of the world's population lives in Eurasia, and a greater part of its physical riches is also located there. Eurasia boasts almost 60% of the world GNP and nearly three quarters of its proven energy reserves. Therefore: "Eurasia is also the location of most of the world's politically assertive and dynamic states. After the United States, the next six largest economies and the next six biggest spenders on military weaponry are located in Eurasia. All but one of the world's overt nuclear powers and all but one of the covert ones are located in Eurasia. The world's two most populous aspirants to regional hegemony and global influence are Eurasian. All of the potential political and/or economic challengers to American primacy are Eurasian. Cumulatively, Eurasia's power vastly overshadows America's."⁸

Thus enumerated, it is possible to understand the concerns of the United States about developments taking place on the vast expanses of Eurasia, and why the American political leadership attaches priority to this region in its policy. Today, in connection with the 9/11 events, a real possibility has opened up for the United States to ensure its presence in the region and exert influence for its interests.

Hoc opus, hic labor est! (This is the toil!)

Events in the region, and particularly the Central Asian part of it, have been developing both rapidly and unpredictably. The new political realities in it are absolutely unlike those that characterized the early 1990s, when the disintegration of the Soviet Union took place and new forms of interstate association began to emerge, principally the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The geopolitical realities of post-Soviet territory have begun implacably to introduce their correctives to

⁷ Zb. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

the former “fraternal” relations between the republics, and indicate the new contours of the political, economic, ideological, transport-communicational, social and ecological problems that face the region. The antiterrorist campaign focused on Afghanistan, has added new nuances to these relations which, far from improving the situation, have had the opposite effect.

Regarding the CIS, it is most likely that it will remain for some time in a state where there is, so to speak, “neither real marriage, nor formal divorce.” This leads many analysts to assert that it is almost at its last gasp and will soon cease to exist—if it is not already dead. However, paraphrasing Mark Twain’s well-known witticism, it is possible to say that rumors of the death of the Commonwealth are really exaggerated. Despite the obvious symptoms of lasting disease in the CIS, whose condition has already become chronic, it is nonetheless premature to think that it is already on its death bed. It has been in such a state for a decade already, but far from bothering anyone, this has even actually suited many. Without riveting anyone to it by iron ties, the Commonwealth has allowed its members to make immediate use of the advantages available to it at a time of crisis. And the fact that it continues to have these advantages must be admitted by even its most implacable critics.

So far everyone, it seems, is comfortable with the amorphous and not too binding structure of the CIS, within the framework of which urgent interstate issues are mainly resolved on a bilateral basis. It is important to grasp that from the outset the CIS was not planned as a supra-state formation designed to resolve certain common tasks, but that it was some kind of a transitional structure, in which each participant was free to develop their involvement or otherwise. This was especially fixed in the Alma-Ata Declaration in December 1991.

The struggle for influence in the Central Asian region—which involves, to a greater or lesser extent, all the leading states of the world—has the potential to turn the region into a troubled buffer zone between the West and the East. The domination or prevailing influence in Central Asia, besides everything else, promises great advantages in the field of possession of rich energy resources. This is especially important, if one takes into account the gradual exhaustion of their reserves in the Persian Gulf region, and that that region is in a permanently unstable situation.

Ultima ratio regum (The final argument of kings, i.e. war)

Geopolitical changes in the world are obvious, but so too is the role that they play in determining the policies of states and defining their national interests. This was quite definitely identified by Brzezinski, who notes that nation-states continue to remain the main units of the world system. In the struggle and competition between them the “geographic location is still the point of departure for the definition of a nation-state’s external priorities, and the size of national territory also remains one of the major criteria of status and power.”⁹

Against this background, it seems strange that certain analysts should question the importance of geopolitics in determining the positions of states in the international arena, and even believe that its role in the interstate relations is actually diminishing. It is asserted, for example, that relations cannot be already understood and described “with the help of such traditional and most influential models of foreign policy as ‘political realism’ or ‘geopolitics.’” Under “political realism,” it is of course important that national interests should be carefully analyzed and understood. The words spoken above belong to Nikolai Kosolapov, a well-known analyst and author of many articles on the topic of present-day international relations and Russia’s foreign policy. It is interesting to note that after the categorical

⁹ Zb. Brzezinski, op. cit., p. 38.

assertion regarding the inadequacy of the previous models of study he himself several pages below outlines the “complex of primary long-term systems tasks” of Russia. He identifies the main ones as: “preservation of the country’s integrity, maintenance of effective control over its territory, resources, economy; overcoming resistance of those external forces, which are not interested in the development of strong influential Russia and actively counteract its revival in that capacity.”¹⁰

Moving to the concrete geopolitical interests of the United States in the Eurasian region, Brzezinski outlines what he considers to be the priorities: “In the short run, it is in America’s interest to consolidate and perpetuate the prevailing geopolitical pluralism on the map of Eurasia. That puts a premium on maneuver and manipulation in order to prevent the emergence of a hostile coalition that could eventually seek to challenge America’s primacy, not to mention the remote possibility of any one particular state seeking to do so. By the middle term, the foregoing should gradually yield to a greater emphasis on the emergence of increasingly important but strategically compatible partners who, prompted by American leadership, might help to shape a more cooperative trans-Eurasian security system. Eventually, in the much longer run still, the foregoing could phase into a global core of genuinely shared political responsibility.”¹¹

The most immediate goal that the U.S. is pursuing, he concludes, is to “make certain that no state or combination of states gains the capacity to expel the United States from Eurasia or even to diminish significantly its decisive arbitrating role.”¹² This essentially expresses the same *idée fixe*, which American strategists and analysts have pursued over the period of post-war history and whose presence in various foreign political documents was noted above. What is crystal clear is that there is absolutely no doubt that the concepts of national interests, geopolitics, and the balance of power, remain important in relations between states, and will continue to serve as major instruments of the United States’ policy in the world arena.

Russia and China will most likely be the powers that in the future may offer the greatest real counteraction to the plans of the United States in Eurasia. Therefore the “middle” states, including first of all the states of Trans-Caucasia, Turkey, Iran, and Central and Middle Asia, will be obliged to take their bearings geopolitically and decide, on the basis of their national interests, what position they should adhere to. There is no such obvious need thus far, but there are no guarantees that it will not arise in the foreseeable future, taking into account the dynamics of development of the present-day world. The events in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 and the participation of many states of the Central Asian region in the antiterrorist campaign, in particular the granting by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan of access to air space and basing rights to the U.S. military, have created a certain foundation for this. Many analysts believe that in spite of all of these statements about the temporary character of the presence in the region of the American armed forces, *the United States will not leave, at least not in the foreseeable future.*

In other words, not only is the U.S. rethinking the geopolitical importance of the Central Asian region, but it is also expressing the desire to create a legal base for carrying out the resultant policies. In plans to restore the “Silk Road,” primary attention is devoted to the maintenance of the balance of power favorable to the United States both in the Caspian region and in Central Asia. This is aimed in the final analysis at the neutralization of hegemonic aspirations on the part of Iran from the south and Russia from the north.

There is considerable hope that the tapping of hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea will make it possible to substantially lower the energy dependence of the United States on the unstable Arab world. This is a vital consideration because, according to certain estimates, during the next two to three dec-

¹⁰ N. Kosolapov, “Rossia v mezhdunarodnoi sisteme nachala XXI veka: vyzov globalizatsii,” in: Rossiiskaia vneshniaia politika na rubezhe vekov: preemstvennost, izmeneniia, perspektivy, IMEMO RAN, Moscow, 2000, pp. 180-181.

¹¹ Zb. Brzezinski, op. cit., p. 198.

¹² Ibidem.

ades world energy consumption must considerably grow. Given such a great demand on energy producers, and the deficits in most countries of the world, it is quite clear what should be expected in the mutual relations of states, striving as best as they can to satisfy their national interests, among which the task of providing national economics with energy resources occupies a central place.

The United States supports geopolitical pluralism on the post-Soviet territory of Central Asia and seeks to counter the desire of any power in the region to dominate, most particularly Russia. Such tactics are the best way to consolidate its influence in the region and provide itself with a role in the development of the region's resource potential. America's primary interest, Brzezinski believes, "is to help ensure that no single power comes to control this geopolitical space and that the global community [read: the United States] has underhindered financial and economic access to it." And one of its chief geopolitical conclusions is as follows: "Geopolitical pluralism will become an enduring reality only when a network of pipeline and transportation routes links the region directly to the major centers of global economic activity via the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas, as well as overland. Hence, Russian efforts to monopolize access need to be opposed as inimical to regional stability."¹³

On the whole we believe that the system of present-day relations after the disintegration of bipolarity is neither "unipolar" nor "multipolar." As of today, it has not yet developed sufficiently enough to make a comprehensive evaluation of its nature and form, and all judgments at this point must be provisional. Today in the world only one superpower really exists but, in our view, one should not draw a conclusion that it exerts a decisive impact on the development of international relations on the whole. The events in Iraq and Yugoslavia, the hostilities against them under the aegis of the United States have shown one thing: it is capable of organizing such actions and even inflict a military defeat to these or other regimes, but alone it cannot realize its goals and channel the development of international relations in a direction desired by it or protect itself from new threats. It is possible to put it thus: today the only superpower is opposed not by a certain equal force, but by a certain international disorder, a chaos, a kind of anarchy, which cannot be controlled, regulated and managed. In this sense the bipolar system was more orderly, more controllable, and therefore, more predictable than the present-day system of international relations. It is therefore no accident that in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, certain influential and far-sighted American analysts and experts said that the United States will now be faced not with a problem of conflict with the monolithic Soviet threat, but how to confront and manage the disintegration of the Soviet Union.¹⁴

How to manage this decline, and indeed whether it is even possible to manage it in general, is a problem that is not only faced by the United States. The new system of a disorderly balance of power has presented the U.S. with more new headaches than advantages, and considerably new material and moral costs, because it is impossible in principle to manage chaos.

It is possible to say that the former global bipolar balance of power has disintegrated, giving place to many regional balances of power, which unlike the first one are unstable, changing and fraught with unpredictable conflicts. If it is possible to call the present-day system of international relations multipolar, then it can be done only in the sense of a certain totality of the loosely linked regional balances of power, which does not merge into a single global dynamic. In this sense the United States can be compared with a "shepherd" whose herd is running in different directions. Sir Winston Churchill rightly noted that the balance of power is the "law of politics ... and not simple expediency prompted by random circumstances, antipathies or other similar feeling."¹⁵

The unbalanced power in the system of international relations exerts in principle the same destructive effect as in mechanics, only its aftermath is much more serious. Mackinder's monolith of the

¹³ Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁴ See, for example: C. Gershman, "Freedom Remains the Touchstone," *The National Interest*, No. 19, Spring 1990, p. 83.

¹⁵ W. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 1, Boston, 1948, pp. 207-208.

Eurasian Heartland is being remodeled in a fatal way. According to Kenneth Waltz, the famous U.S. scholar and analyst, the absence of balance poses a danger for all states, not excluding the most powerful. Unbalanced power, he writes, “feeding the ambitions of certain states in expanding their influence, may prompt them to a dangerous and adventurous policy. From this it is possible to conclude that security of all states depends on maintaining the balance of power among them.”¹⁶

P o s t s c r i p t

Categories of morality or personal taste would hardly be appropriate to evaluate the world system. It is possible to find plenty of arguments that it is in a good state, and equally many that contend the opposite. Here, in our view, it is rightful only to observe that the system of the bipolar balance of power was created due to quite definite objective circumstances, which emerged after the end of World War II, and themselves came to an end with the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

All the contemporary phenomena and problems outlined in this paper are inseparable from the process of globalization: some, including international terrorism, can be reckoned as its direct consequence and inevitable product. The process of globalization and the growth of the interdependence of states, especially in the economic sphere, has become one of the chief features of the present-day world. Many states are being newly forced to adapt themselves to this situation, especially those which only in the last decade have embarked on the path of independent political and economic development.

The new sovereign states created on post-Soviet territory, including Central Asia, should rid themselves of any illusions about a new world order, and accept the controversial rules of survival in the modern world. They are located on Halford Mackinder’s Heartland, an ongoing site of international struggle, and must act accordingly. In particular, they have to defend and strengthen their sovereignty, political and economic independence, simultaneously taking into account both the process of globalization and interdependence, and their own national interests—factors which do not always coincide.

¹⁶ K. Waltz, “International Structure and the Balance of Power,” in: *International Politics and Foreign Policy. A Reader in Research and Theory*, ed. by J. Rosenau, New York, 1969, p. 312.