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## European Studies

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# Zigzags of the Post-Imperial Syndrome

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Received May 24, 2022; revised May 30, 2022; accepted May 30, 2022

**Abstract**—The death of every empire is always painful and often turns into tragedy. It inevitably entails painful processes: the rupture of habitual economic ties, the loss of vast territories and spheres of influence, the formation of new states and the definition of borders between them, the emergence of national minorities on the territory of neighbors, etc. However, perhaps the most painful result is the sense of loss of self-worth, a complex of lost greatness that develops into the so-called post-imperial syndrome. In the 20th century, it manifested itself in Germany, Great Britain, France, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Turkey, and former metropolises, which, with the loss of their colonies, lost not only established ties but also geopolitical influence, and with it their former imperial power. In the first quarter of the 21st century, Russia also has had to face the post-imperial syndrome. This article is devoted to its manifestations at this time.

**Keywords:** disintegration of the USSR, CIS, geopolitics, Russian world, Ukrainian crisis, special military operation, international isolation, sanctions, Winston Churchill, three circles of foreign policy, post-imperial syndrome

**DOI:** 10.1134/S101933162212005X

### INTRODUCTION

The death of every empire has always been painful and often turned into tragedy. It inevitably entailed painful processes: the rupture of habitual economic ties, the loss of vast territories and spheres of influence, the formation of new states and the definition of borders between them, the emergence of national minorities in the territory of neighbors, etc. However, perhaps the most painful result is the sense of loss of self-importance, a complex of lost greatness that develops into the so-called post-imperial syndrome. In the 20th century, it manifested itself in Germany, Great Britain, France, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Turkey, and the former metropolises, which, with the loss of colonies, lost not only established ties but also geopolitical influence, and with it their former imperial power.

At the same time, we should take into account one simple, albeit, proven by historical experience as a universal and cruel pattern: there is no greater tragedy for the national self-consciousness and the “health of the nation” than defeat in war and bitterness over lost greatness. Sometimes this gives rise to resentment, forming a feeling of humiliation and frustration, which is almost always followed by the rise of revanchism and even a thirst for revenge, and as a result, a firm desire to restore historical justice at all costs [1].

In the first quarter of the 21st century, Russia also has had to face the post-imperial syndrome.

### ECHOES OF DECAY

The collapse of the USSR, one of the two superpowers of the world, having ended the era of global bipolar confrontation, led to the development of processes, the scale and depth of which were hardly realized by the participants of the meeting in Belovezhskaya Pushcha in December 1991. And not only because the people who gathered there clearly did not possess the rare gift that is required in such situations to be able to see beyond their contemporaries [2].

The creation of an amorphous coalition of the CIS on the ruins of the Soviet superpower and the destruction of the bipolar global configuration that took shape in the second half of the 20th century immediately launched the processes of restructuring the previously formed world order.

In contrast to the one-time cessation of the existence of the USSR as “a subject of international law and geopolitical reality” [3], which was stated in the Belovezh Accords, the large-scale geopolitical restructuring that followed it dragged on for three whole decades. And it has not yet been completed, which is explained by its internal contradictions, the alternation of steps in different directions, and the backsliding.

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The rapidly changing modern world cannot be formed from scratch. The rudiments of the recent past, as well as the material and spiritual remnants of the activities of previous generations, which do not entirely disappear with them, but are transferred to the new era, will always remain in it.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the bipolar structure of the world put an end not only to the global confrontation between the two superpowers and their satellites but also led to the expansion of the Western bloc, which from then on acted as a pole of attraction for the states that were previously in the orbit of the Soviet influence.

Many experts then believed that with the loss of allies and the collapse of the Soviet superpower itself, both its former imperial greatness and Soviet expansionism would become a thing of the past, and sovereign national states would arise on the ruins of the USSR, one of which would be the new Russia.

However, the formation of the post-bipolar geopolitical picture was not easy. The collapse of the integrated structures of Eastern Europe (WTO, CMEA) was not accompanied by similar processes in NATO and the EEC, which, having managed to adapt to the new realities, and expanded their sphere of influence and responsibility through movement to the east. Thanks to this, a fundamentally different geopolitical reality quickly formed in the world, in which the new Russia, weakened by losses, clearly did not fit.

### GEOPOLITICAL DEADLOCK

An essential factor in this reality was the renewed NATO military-political bloc, created back in 1949 with the aim of protecting Western Europe from Soviet penetration. Reformed in the early 1990s, it was nevertheless perceived by modern Russia as a threat and a tool to contain it.

The struggle to find its own rightful place in a changed world did not immediately lead it to its current foreign policy course. The chaotic policy of President Yeltsin, who pushed the Soviet Union to collapse, was aimed at departing from communism and Soviet isolationism, embracing Western values, and integrating the country quickly and hastily into existing international structures and associations. Associated with these processes were both the course of internal reform and the emergence of a new Russian business and political elite, whose interests were oriented primarily towards the West. At that time, the syndrome of post-imperial greatness, which inevitably arose in all the empires of the past that have now disappeared, had not yet had time to develop in Russia.

The policy of V.V. Putin, who came to power in 1999, turned out to be fundamentally different. Russia's foreign policy under President Putin, who in his Munich speech in 2007 called into question the world leadership of the United States [4], began to have an

openly anti-American and anti-Western orientation, and the former foreign policy of Russia began to be fundamentally revised. It is time to review and correct the events of the recent past.

Ten years after the collapse of the USSR, it became clear that, left without allies, having lost its former spheres of regional and global influence, unsuccessfully trying to maintain segments of the disintegrating Soviet legacy in the conditions of ruptured economic ties, and countering the Russophobia emanating from a number of former Soviet republics and Eastern European satellites, Russia suddenly found itself in a geopolitical impasse.

It was the awareness of this fact by its new political leadership that helped to purposefully create a yearning for lost greatness in a part of the Russian elite, which eventually turned into a hypertrophied post-imperial syndrome, accompanied by a relentless desire to restore it at all costs.

Seeking to create new geopolitical fields and form (primarily along the perimeter of its own borders) a strategic security space with the help of its energy strategy, as well as its trade in energy and arms, by conquering new world markets and integration efforts, Russia has increasingly begun to be perceived in the West as a new revisionist power seeking revenge.

Its diplomatic efforts in this area did not have the desired effect, and attempts to solve emerging problems by military means (Georgia, Ukraine) has only strengthened the West's desire to contain it. The instrument of such a policy was a large-scale sanctions regime, which had never before been applied even to the USSR.

Having come close to Russia's western borders and having doubled in size through the admission of new members over the past decades, Russia began to perceive NATO as the main threat to its strategic stability and the challenge of the beginning of the 21st century. Moreover, this realization did not dawn on Russia immediately.

Russia's initial perception of NATO as a partner in the 1990s, as well as its wait-and-see position after 2014, in the context of freezing relations in the format of the Russia–NATO Council, held back the formation of a long-term geopolitical strategy, postponing for an indefinite period the inevitable showdown between them.

### LAST RUSSIAN WARNING

It is always difficult to revise the policies of predecessors. And the current era is a vivid confirmation of this.

In the circumstances, with mutual trust and constructive contacts absent for a long period of time, after a long break, Russia suddenly came up with an unexpectedly large-scale, but clearly overdue and obviously unrealizable initiative, proposing that the

US and NATO conclude two documents: a Treaty between Russia and the United States on security guarantees and an agreement on measures to ensure the security of Russia and NATO member states. Draft copies were transferred to them on December 15, 2021 [5, 6].

The core of the Russian proposals was as follows: ruling out further eastward expansion of NATO, agreement not to admit former Soviet republics in the alliance, and agreement on not entering into military cooperation with them. The parties had to undertake obligations not to use the territory of other states for the purpose of preparing or carrying out an armed attack against the other Party, or other actions affecting the fundamental security interests of the other Party; and refrain from deploying their armed forces and weapons, including within the framework of international organizations, military alliances or coalitions, in areas where such deployment would be perceived by the other Party as a threat to its national security, with the exception of such deployment within national territories of the Parties.

This Russian initiative, which, if implemented, could become the beginning of a radical restructuring of the entire system of international security in Europe and the world, was initially perceived by the West as a belated and undisguised ultimatum woven from propaganda and blackmail. Although this reaction was accompanied by moderately approving diplomatic overtures from the West, they obviously did not intend to fall into the cunning trap set by Putin on Christmas Eve.

As, however, expected, the negotiations initiated by Russia on guarantees of its own security, aimed at solving the overdue problem in one fell swoop, did not yield results. Russia's Western partners turned out to be extremely diplomatic, but extremely intractable. No written promises with legal guarantees (which the Russian side insistently demanded) regarding, first of all, the nonexpansion of NATO to the East and the reduction of its military infrastructure to the level of 1997 were offered by them, and the negotiations themselves were perceived by Russia as unsuccessful.

Admittedly, there were still hopes for a moratorium on the deployment of a new generation of intermediate and shorter range missiles in Europe, on discussing issues of strategic stability, and creating a new arms control mechanism.

#### UNSATISFACTORY ANSWER

However, on the evening of January 26, the written responses from the United States and NATO, which Russia insisted on, did not materialize. They, as expected, contained a refusal to fulfill the main requirements of the Kremlin. NATO's policy in the post-Soviet space (a key issue in the package of Russian proposals) was not subject to revision. The West intended to continue to support Ukraine and was not

going to provide any guarantees regarding the non-expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance and abandoning the principle of "open doors."

In an effort to shift the attention of the Russian side to other problems, making it responsible for the escalation on the border with Ukraine and preparing an invasion of its territory, the United States and its allies expressed, nevertheless, their readiness for negotiations and discussion of important, but still (as it turned out) minor problems for Russia. These included deploying strategic and offensive weapons in Ukraine, expanding U.S.–Russian engagement, improving exercise control, returning to mutual inspections, resuming an arms control dialogue, and maintaining strategic stability. NATO proposed to resume relations in the format of the Russia–NATO Council by establishing a direct line of communication and restoring their missions in Moscow and Brussels [7].

And yet, what was the latest Russian warning, which received an unsatisfactory response from the West, aimed at? After all, the obviously unacceptable main demand for non-expansion of NATO, included in the package of accompanying proposals, could hardly have caused any other reaction than rejection. Or perhaps the real purpose of this Christmas message was something else altogether?

Despite Russia's dissatisfaction with the responses it received, its initiative (as a coercive tool), which appeared in an environment of almost complete lack of contact and mutual trust, could have a real positive effect, namely, open the doors to that long-awaited bilateral dialog, which had been blocked over the past few years.

However, instead of the expected start of negotiations on February 24, 2022, a real tragedy occurred. Why did this happen?

#### UKRAINIAN KNOT

A whole complex of circumstances created by all internal and external participants in the Ukrainian crisis led to the tragic denouement of the long-term Russian-Ukrainian confrontation [8].

First of all, it is the irresponsible, short-sighted, and openly provocative policy of the nationalist, European-integration-driven Ukrainian political elite, which over the past 17 years, with the support of extremist groups and Western countries, supplied it with weapons, has pursued an openly anti-Russian course, building a new Ukrainian identity and statehood based on it.

The cultivated Russophobic sentiments not only became the base of the behavior of a number of political activists in Kyiv but were also quickly adopted by a significant part of Ukrainian society. In 2021, over 70% of Ukrainians considered Russia to be a hostile state [9]. The glorification of Bandera, discrimination against the Russian language, and calls for reprisals

against the hated Muscovites became the norm of public consciousness and behavior supported by the Ukrainian authorities, forming the idea of Ukraine as a neo-Nazi state, which was used by the Kremlin as a justification for the subsequent military special operation.

A key role in this was played by the internal conflict, accompanied by external interference, that flared up between the authorities in Kyiv, encouraged by the West, and the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR, secretly supported by Russia. In response to their resistance, an antiterrorist operation (ATO) was launched in the southeast of the country, which quickly developed into full-scale military operations using heavy armored vehicles, short-range ballistic missiles, rocket artillery, and strike aircraft.

For eight years, hopes for a resolution of this conflict were pinned on the Minsk agreements, whose implementation was sabotaged for years by those who disagreed with a number of their provisions (implementation procedures and constitutional reform involving decentralization and granting of a special status for certain regions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and Kyiv stubbornly striving to join NATO. All this contributed to the escalation of tension in the region, the possible consequences of which were then not given much importance.

This fact became the main irritant for Russia, which has completely exhausted its diplomatic resources and patience in search of at least some kind of compromise, but is still interested in keeping the annexed Crimea and its influence in the Donbas, in the hope that these territories will become a reliable barrier against openly unfriendly pressure.

To this end, in 2019, Russia initiated a simplified procedure for issuing Russian passports to residents of the DPR and LPR. On April 24, President Putin signed a corresponding decree [10]. In response to this, Ukraine appealed to the UN Security Council and the country's Foreign Ministry expressed its protest. During the entire time of the Ukrainian crisis, 860 000 residents of Donbass received Russian citizenship, while retaining their Ukrainian passports [11, 12]. Many experts qualified such actions of the Kremlin as an undisguised desire to reinforce their own claims to the separatist-controlled regions of Donbass, which they consider as their sphere of influence and which could be integrated into Russia in the foreseeable future [13].

### ESCALATION

If we look at the evolution of the Ukrainian crisis, we will see that all the events of December 2021–May 2022 are very closely related to each other.

The protracted Russian–Ukrainian confrontation, which deepened after the annexation of Crimea and the start of hostilities in Donbas, and was accompa-

nied by growing mutual hostile propaganda, reached its climax by the end of 2021.

Fearing a possible new offensive of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in Donbass and the seizure of Crimea, Russia decided to take preventive measures and deliberately aggravate the smoldering conflict by concentrating its troops along the border with Ukraine (under the guise of exercises) in November 2021 and at the same time presenting the United States and NATO with obviously impracticable ultimatums (non-expansion of NATO to the East and reduction of its military infrastructure to the level of 1997).

On February 17, 2022, the situation in Donbas escalated. The leadership of the DPR and LPR accused Ukraine of shelling and preparing a “deep breakthrough” on the territory of the republics in order to capture them. On February 18, by agreement with the Russian authorities, it began an emergency mass evacuation of its residents (primarily women, children, and the elderly) to Rostov Oblast, where a state of emergency was introduced. Later, it was extended to Voronezh, Kursk, Penza, Saratov, Volgograd, Ulyanovsk, and Oryol oblasts [14].

The complete failure of diplomatic efforts, the refusal of the West to agree to Russia's main demand and the impasse in the implementation of the Minsk agreements led to the fact that on February 21, Russia decided to take another radical step, which it had been wary of taking for many years. After lengthy deliberation, the Kremlin agreed to recognize the independence of the DPR and LPR [15] and sign treaties of friendship, cooperation, mutual assistance, and military support with these separatist-minded republics, which were struggling for survival [16].

Following this, in the face of growing confrontation, Moscow dared to go even further and began to comply with previously announced warnings, resorting to a military-technical response. The situation had escalated to the limit.

### SPECIAL OPERATION

Early on the morning of February 24, Russia launched a special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine. Its purpose, according to President Putin, was “to protect people who for eight years have been subjected to abuse and genocide by the Kyiv regime.” For this, according to him, it was planned to carry out the “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine,” to bring to justice all war criminals responsible for the “bloody crimes against civilians” in Donbass [17].

Seventy-five days after the start of the special operation, in his speech during the military parade on May 9, 2022, Putin stated that Russia had preemptively rebuffed Ukraine's aggression, and it was “a forced, timely, and only right decision—the decision of a sovereign, strong, and independent country” [18].

Since then, the Russian–Ukrainian confrontation has been developing militarily. All the warnings of the West, which stubbornly asserted in January 2022 that Russia was preparing for an invasion (despite the repeated firm assurances of the Russian leadership to the contrary) nevertheless materialized.

Another military conflict had flared up again on the territory of the former Soviet Union. This time between two of the formerly largest Soviet republics: Russia and Ukraine. The largest military operations since the Second World War began in the center of Europe, which led to the rupture of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The fraternal Slavic peoples, who once fought together against Nazism and defeated it, now began to fight against each other. The very fact of what happened was hard to believe.

However, by hoping that the West would not react forcefully and choosing a military way of resolving this problem, Russia, in the opinion of many, took a fatal step and thereby ruined any opportunities of improving relations with the leading world powers, and at the same time destroying its international reputational ranking.

Admittedly, despite the President Putin's statement, from the very beginning, the ultimate goal of this special operation was not clear: the destruction of Ukraine's entire military infrastructure, the eradication of national extremism there, the expansion of the territories of the LPR and DPR to the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, forcing the recognition of Crimea as part of Russia, the complete defeat, capitulation, and establishment of Russian control over all of Ukraine, assurances that Ukraine would not join NATO and remain neutral, a change of the political regime in Kyiv in favor of a puppet pro-Russian government, and, perhaps, the further division of the Ukrainian state, which would call into question its very future.

It is quite obvious that we are witnessing the most dramatic events in the development of the Ukrainian crisis, which has completely changed the entire international context and has resulted in a major humanitarian catastrophe, events that have caused devastation, refugee flows, and despair for millions of people.

### INTERNATIONAL REACTION

Regardless of the terms used for the hostilities launched by Russia against Ukraine ("special operation for the sake of demilitarization and denazification"), the West perceived them as aggression, as a challenge to the entire system of European security, as a reckless adventure, and a senseless bloody battle initiated personally by the President Putin, and began to form its own consolidated response to it [19].

First of all, these events have fundamentally changed the relations between Russia and the West,

which is further intensifying its efforts to isolate Russia internationally and turn it into a world pariah. At the same time, the possibility of normalizing relations with Russia according to the 2014 model, as happened after the annexation of Crimea [20], has now been completely ruled out.

In response to the SMO, Russia's membership of the Council of Europe has been suspended, its application to join the OECD has been rejected, and the World Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have stopped their activities in Russia. The international payment systems *Visa* and *Mastercard* have also suspended operations in Russia. In order to block transactions with Western banks and the collapse of the ruble exchange rate, the reserves of the Bank of Russia are being frozen for the first time. Dozens of foreign companies have stopped their business activities in Russia.

Sanctions are also being made stricter against Russia's public debt: a ban was introduced on any transactions in the primary and secondary markets with Russian ruble federal loan bonds or foreign currency sovereign Eurobonds issued after March 1, 2022. Large-scale arrests and freezing of Russian assets in foreign banks have taken place.

Immediately after the start of the SMO, Russia's National Wealth Fund, which was formed through the government's additional oil and gas revenues, and placed in debt obligations in the form of securities of foreign government agencies and central banks of foreign countries, was frozen [21]. On April 5, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss announced that the West had frozen \$350 billion (more than 60%) of Russia's gold and foreign exchange reserves [22]. The property of Russian oligarchs abroad has been confiscated. The airspace of the EU and the United States has been closed to Russian aviation.

While the sanctions imposed after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 were limited to a number of key financial and industrial institutions and several hundred individuals, the new sanctions have turned out to be much broader and more sensitive. The restrictions imposed are of an unprecedented and complex nature. And Russia was clearly not prepared for this.

Like the previous restrictions, they are considered by the initiators as a punishment, as retribution for a sudden act of unmotivated aggression (this is how Russia's actions in Ukraine are perceived) and are aimed at squeezing Russia out of the world economy, as well as restricting the export of high-tech products and the activities of a number of financial and industrial institutions. Hundreds of Russian legislators have been sanctioned, as well as individuals from President Putin's inner circle and even President Putin himself.

In addition, the participation of Russia in various international organizations, cultural forums, negotiations, sports competitions, and other events has been blocked, academic exchanges have been stopped, and

“golden passport” programs for Russian investors have been canceled.

In many countries, even cultural figures and other Russians who were not involved in the conflict have been subjected to persecution and ostracism.

From 2014 to May 2022, 48 countries have imposed six packages of sanctions against Russia, affecting in total thousands of individuals and legal entities and turning it into a world leader in terms of the number of restrictions imposed. In the short term, they will slow down the modernization of the Russian economy, and in the long term, they pose a serious threat to its development.

So far, the restrictions have not affected the entire oil and gas sector of Russia, which is the main source of income for the state (although the United States has announced a ban on the import of Russian oil, gas and other energy sources). It is also not planned to completely disconnect the Russian economy from the international banking payment system, *SWIFT*. Only seven sanctioned Russian banks (VTB, Otkritie, Novikombank, Promsvyazbank, Rossiya, Sovcombank, and VEB.RF) have been affected.

It is still too early to talk about the economic consequences of the measures taken. However, according to the most general estimates, according to the IMF, the total loss of Russian GDP from the imposed sanctions could be up to 10% annually. The decline in Ukraine’s GDP in 2022 could reach up to 35% [23].

#### OPPOSITE EFFECT

As a result of the special military operation, Ukraine has become even more hostile and embittered. It is concerned about its security and therefore striving for revenge and restoration of justice.

The European Union, Britain, the United States, Canada, and many other countries have started providing military-technical and financial assistance to support Ukraine’s resistance [*Reports of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, 2022, no. 390]. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Dmytro Kuleba, the Ukrainian side has assembled “an international anti-war coalition, which includes at least 86 states and 15 international organizations” [24]. A total of 141 countries supported the resolution of the UN General Assembly “Aggression against Ukraine” condemning Russia, adopted on March 2, 2022 [25].

On March 16, the International Court of Justice in The Hague announced its decision on provisional measures in a suit brought by Ukraine against Russia on February 27, accusing Russia of violating the Convention on the Prevention of Genocide. Despite the fact that Russia, which had previously declared its nonrecognition of the jurisdiction of the court in this case, refused to participate in the proceedings, the judges nevertheless considered that they could make

a decision in Russia’s absence. The international judges, with 13 votes in favor and two against (representatives of the Russian Federation and China), ordered Russia to immediately stop the hostilities that it launched on February 24 on the territory of Ukraine. The court unanimously called on both parties not to take any action that could aggravate or expand the dispute that had begun [26, 27].

On April 28, the House of Representatives of the US Congress by an overwhelming majority of votes (417 in favor, 10 against) approved a bill on the supply of arms to Ukraine under the Lend-Lease program, which has not been used since the Second World War [28, 29]. The US Senate had approved a similar bill on April 7th. On May 9, the law was signed into law by President Biden [30]. According to it, the United States will be able to lend or lease weapons and other assistance to Ukraine and other countries of Eastern Europe affected by Russia’s SMO in Ukraine for two years in order to “help strengthen the defense capability these countries and protect their civilian populations from potential invasion or ongoing aggression by Russia’s armed forces,” bypassing standard bureaucratic procedures [31, 32].

A supply control center has been established in Stuttgart under responsibility of the US European Command. The center’s weapons include anti-aircraft guns, ammunition, artillery, drones, and howitzers. Logistic support will also be provided. Under this law, Ukraine will receive \$40 billion in military aid and economic and humanitarian support. The goal of the new US initiative is to weaken Russia’s military potential to such an extent that it no longer has the ability to attack neighboring countries [33].

Today, dozens of countries around the world are doing everything possible so that Russia’s protracted special military operation in Ukraine, which has led to significant human casualties, millions of refugees, an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe, and has been accompanied by powerful informational confrontation and mutually hostile propaganda, does not achieve its goals. In order that the SMO becomes Russia’s biggest strategic failure and results in the opposite effect: the collapse of the Kremlin’s energy strategy, the growth of Russophobia, anti-war demonstrations, economic and reputational damage, the Western countries uniting and rallying together, the expansion of NATO, and the further containment of Russia’s imperial aspirations, presented through a controversial religious-historiosophical and cultural—historical doctrine: the idea of the “Russian world” [34].

Thus, in response to the special operation, the North Atlantic bloc began to rapidly build up its own military presence in the east of the alliance, and the United States itself has started considering options for deploying NATO-integrated air defense systems in the Baltic countries. Poland has declared its readiness to deploy nuclear weapons on its territory. Sweden and

Finland have announced their decision to join NATO. “Russia is not the neighbor we thought it was,” said Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin [35].

The escalation of the Ukrainian crisis has resulted in the disruption of the Russian-American negotiations on arms control and strategic stability that had only recently been resumed. The prospects for at least some normalization of Russia’s relations with the “collective” West, which, according to President Putin, turned out to be an “empire of lies” [36], have also moved away indefinitely.

Moreover, the changing goals of the special operation, as well as the statements of the highest representatives of the Russian authorities that it must end the US course of world domination [37] and even the centuries-old “dominance” of the West, which will provide Russia with a great future, are simply bewildering.

It is worth noting the most undesirable possible effect of the special operation or a shift related to a sharp increase in hostile anti-Russian sentiment around the world, the intensification of military cooperation between European countries, the strengthening and expansion of NATO, as well as its refusal to take into account Russian interests, and the reduction of the European market for Russian exports, multiple expansion of a group of states unfriendly to Russia, unprecedented rallying and unification of the Ukrainian nation on an anti-Russian basis, further European integration of Ukraine, a fundamental shakeup of the entire international landscape not in the interests of Russia, boycott by international organizations, and the real prospect of Russia’s long-term international isolation primarily from the West, which entails scientific regression, cultural degeneration, and technological degradation [38].

Russia’s relations with its few closest allies and strategic partners, as well as the very concept of the “pivot to the East” are also at risk. First of all, we should pay attention to the reaction of the CIS countries and members of the CSTO, Russia’s closest military and political allies. Not wanting to be drawn into the aggravated Russian-Ukrainian conflict, they are trying to maintain their neutrality as best they can, except for Belarus, which turned out to be the only country that supported Russia’s SMO.

The UNGA resolution ES-11/1 of March 2, 2022 [25], condemning the military operation, and demanding the immediate and complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine, as well as the cancellation of decisions on the recognition of the DPR and LPR, which was supported by an overwhelming majority of 141 votes, was rejected by only 5 countries: Russia, Belarus, Syria, North Korea and Eritrea. Among the 35 abstentions were Russia’s closest allies in the CSTO: Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and its “irreplaceable strategic partner” China [39]. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan did not vote at all [40].

The lack of unity among the members of the CSTO regarding Russia’s SMO in Ukraine was also manifested during the summit in Moscow on May 16, 2022 [41].

## RUSSIA AND THE WEST

Over the centuries, relations between Russia and the West have changed dramatically. The watershed here was the transformations carried out by Peter I in the first quarter of the 18th century, aimed at forcibly Europeanizing Russia and changing Russians’ attitude towards Europe, although leaving it for a long time to come as a semifeudal absolutist power with serfdom and elements of Eastern despotism, which consolidated the stagnant nature of development.

No matter how the historical dialog between the two civilizations evolved, there was always a fundamental contradiction in it: between the opposition to the “foreign” Western world, accompanied by hostile anti-Western propaganda, leading Russia to self-isolation and turning into a besieged fortress, and its persistent desire to enter it.

Without a doubt, despite the powerful Asian segment that still influences the internal situation and Russia’s foreign policy, even in the period before Peter the Great, from the time of the adoption of Christianity by Prince Vladimir of Kyiv in 988, Russia nevertheless developed as an integral part of European Christian culture. Admittedly, the period of feudal fragmentation, which coincided with the forced dependence of Russian lands on the Khans of the Golden Horde, secured the Asian influence over Russia for two long centuries.

However, the liberation from the 200-year yoke in the battle on Ugra River on October 8–20, 1480, followed by the unification of princely fiefdoms around Moscow, and the formation of the centralized state of Moscow in the 15th century under Ivan III, led to the development of closer contacts with Western European countries, strengthened by trade and dynastic marriages.

The fact that Russia’s movement in a European direction was periodically interrupted (under the influence of conflicts and wars) by anti-Western backlashes testifies to the complex Eurasian nature of this in its own way unique geopolitical phenomenon that has developed as a result of continental expansion eastward, but building its civilizational future mainly in the West.

Over the centuries, from the first ancient Russian state of Kievan Rus to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of modern Russia, the West has occupied an increasingly larger role in its foreign policy, and inevitably becoming decisive.

The collapse of the Soviet Union launched a similar trend in the new sovereign states—their desire to build their own contours of relations with the West,

which, however, in the 21st century caused a negative reaction from Russia.

### WINSTON CHURCHILL'S LESSONS

The process of acquiring a new role on the ruins of the old bipolar world, dragged on for 30 years, turned out not to be easy for Russia, which emerged from the collapsed superpower and defended its interests. It involuntarily forces one to turn to historical parallels, which, of course, should not be taken too literally. However, certain conclusions from them still need to be drawn [1].

When the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill left the Potsdam Conference on July 25, 1945 for London after the announcement of the results of the parliamentary elections held the day before, many thought that he would never return. However, Churchill himself, who left his luggage in Germany, still hoped to continue participating in the historic meetings that decided the fate of the post-war world. True, the British, who repaid him with ingratitude, considered that the victories in the war and Churchill's photographs in the electoral portfolio of the Conservatives were clearly not enough for success in the elections, and voted against the Conservatives.

After leaving the post of prime minister, losing the political battle, but still undefeated, Churchill fell into despondency, which, however, did not last long. The active nature of this mighty man demanded appropriate activity. Secluded in his estate Chartwell, he took up two of his favorite hobbies: painting and literature.

His work on the Second World War [42], having become a monument of military memoirs, literature, and at the same time fundamental historical research, immediately and forever entered the world's historiography, and he received the Nobel Prize for it. However, for Churchill, the war was already in the past, and he himself wanted to change and build not the past, but the modern world, the configurations of which were then rapidly changing.

Oppressed by the thought that the victory over Nazism was accompanied by the loss of former greatness and the collapse of the British Empire, he, in overcoming his own imperial complexes, tried to find new structures for the rapidly changing post-war world and a place in it for the losing power of Great Britain.

### THREE CIRCLES OF GREAT BRITAIN

The result of these unhurried reflections was a coherent theory, which, in the opinion of the former British prime minister with a penetrating mind, should have become the philosophical basis of its new foreign policy. The core of his idea was simple and consisted in the fact that henceforth England should build its foreign policy based on a clearly justified strategy within "three large circles."

1. In the *first circle*, he included the countries of the British Commonwealth of Nations and the British Empire itself with its territories. With a desire at all costs (with the help of imperial preferences and the preservation of the sterling zone) to keep former colonies scattered around the world and tuning into independent states in the orbit of its influence, he pursued one pragmatic goal: to preserve the geopolitical space of Britain that had been formed over centuries, and together with it reliable sources of raw materials, labor resources, and markets.

2. In the *second circle*, Churchill included all the English-speaking countries united around the United States. England itself, and with it Canada and other British dominions were contained in this circle. Great Britain itself was assigned the role of the main European ally of the United States, which should build the so-called special relation with the overseas superpower, excluding any serious disagreements between them.

3. Finally, in the *third circle*, Churchill set aside a united Europe, in which only England could connect sea and air routes, becoming the undisputed and undeniable leader of the entire European region, weakened by Nazism and the military defeat of Germany and its allies. In addition, he understood that only a united Europe could resist the growing influence of the Soviet Union after the victory [43].

Building his construction, he proceeded primarily from the fact that England, being in each of these circles, would be able to adapt to the new postimperial realities and, transforming the crumbling empire, would retain its leading role in the renewed world. Thanks to Winston Churchill (who preferred to boldly change circumstances rather than follow them), like hoops tightening a crumbling barrel, these three large circles became the conceptual basis and constant value of the British foreign policy for a long time.

### THREE ORBITS OF RUSSIA

The fact that lessons from the past, as a rule, are learned with difficulty, is no secret to anyone. Let us try to understand whether Churchill's idea (who believed that "for no country has fate been as cruel as for Russia") is suitable for modern Russia, which is experiencing today (as England once was) postimperial syndrome, for Russia, which has become the heirless of the collapsed, but once powerful Soviet superpower, created in turn on the historical foundation of monarchical, imperial Russia?

Indeed, Churchill's concept undoubtedly has certain universal features that can be used to characterize collapsed empires, and therefore (as a scheme) is entirely applicable to Russia as well. The main feature is the loss of the former spheres of influence (territories, sources of raw materials, and markets for goods and capital investment, sources of cheap labor, etc.),



which multiplied the power of the metropolis itself many times over, distinguishing it from a number of other countries. Proceeding from this, but still with the understanding of a certain conventionality of the proposed analogy, we can distinguish three large circles: three orbits of the foreign policy of modern Russia.

**First circle** (the post-Soviet space or the near abroad), without a doubt, is a priority for Russia, since it forms the security perimeter along its current borders. The space of the CIS and other independent states that were once part of the Soviet Union (15 countries with a population of more than 298 million people) has not become cushioned in 30 years. A buffer that would mitigate the undesirable effects of recent allies who have sometimes turned into spiteful neighbors whom Russia never managed to “bind” to itself again. Dangerous gaps have formed in it (the Baltic countries, Poland, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, etc.), eroding the strategically important border security of the Russian state.

**Second circle:** Eurasia covers 94 countries with a population of more than 5.4 billion people. Being the largest of the six continents of the planet, throughout history it has become the main arena of ideological, economic and political splits, wars, and conflicts, in which Russia has almost always been involved. Overcoming the era of conflict and turning Eurasia into a peaceful space, where if not all, then the main disagreements and conflicts would be successfully resolved, is an important strategic goal that not a single generation inhabiting it has been able to achieve so far. At the same time, the Eurasian side of the current Russian policy (despite the difficult relations with Europe and NATO) should not be limited to its eastern (Chinese) direction.

**Third circle** (global). Its formation is the result of previous eras, and mainly the era of the Cold War, that bipolar system of international relations in which there were two superpowers that built two spheres of their own geopolitical influence and two opposing worlds on a planetary scale. The global expansionism of the Soviet Union in the second half of the 20th century was not in vain and still remains in the national code of Russians.

As was the centuries-old continental expansion, as a result of which the Russian Empire itself was formed, the largest state in the world. The main content of Russia’s foreign policy behavior in this circle should be its relations with the United States, which, using the tools of its own global dominance and geopolitical advantages formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has become an important and integral player in the post-Soviet space. Realizing their global responsibility, the two nuclear superpowers of the world, despite the confrontational axis formed between them, cannot but coordinate their policies, primarily in the field of security and arms control.

However, they cannot limit their cooperation to the military sphere.

### PARADOXES OF RUSSIAN GREATNESS

Sometimes it seems that the sphere of international relations resembles an infinite Universe: with many large and small planets moving along the given orbits.

Admittedly, the earthly life of this Universe is much more complicated. Today, large states, becoming world centers of power, attract small ones, primarily with the help of economic and financial instruments, often influencing them by the power of their own example, spreading the achievements of their culture, universal ideals, and values, while creating alliances that multiply their own power, and thereby forming such orbits around themselves, the movement along which occurs not forcedly, under duress, but consciously and voluntarily.

As for the Russian question, around which unceasing passions have been unfolding in the world for centuries, then, remembering Churchill, we should take into account his words spoken almost 100 years ago: “We can measure the strength of the Russian Empire by the blows it has endured, by the disasters it has endured, by the inexhaustible forces that it has developed, and by the restoration of strength that it has proved capable of” [41].

Unsuccessful attempts to keep imperial possessions from disintegrating and nostalgia for lost power, forming a complex of former greatness, which destroyed the Weimar Republic in its time, and after it the Third Reich, years later manifested itself in all the empires of the 20th century that disappeared. This nostalgia has embraced modern Russia, which found itself in geopolitical loneliness.

Will it be able to survive this and, having overcome the protracted postimperial syndrome with all its zig-zags, complete the period of painful searches, finally finding its rightful place in the coordinate system of the rapidly changing 21st century, a century that requires accelerated modernization of not only obsolete state and political institutions but also a profound transformation of Russian society itself?

Sometimes life itself raises fateful questions, but it does so, alas, with a significant delay.

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