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RUSSIAN VISION OF STRATEGIC BALANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY IN THE SPIRIT OF POLITICAL REALISM

ABSTRACT: Over the past two decades, Russian foreign policy has evolved significantly. It aims to seek a change in the global balance of power. This evolution proceeded from attempts to establish cooperation with the West, through a confrontational narrative, ending with political and military actions. The purpose of this article is to analyse the present Russian view of the current international order and to define its future shape based on assumptions and specific actions in the sphere of the aforementioned foreign policy. Particularly useful for the needs of the conducted research is the reference to the theory of political realism. This is determined by the fact that the Russian Federation, contesting the current hegemonic international order, aims to create a multipolar world with the key balancing role of the great powers.

KEYWORDS: international relations, strategic balance, political realism, Russia, China

Introduction

From a geopolitical point of view, the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was of key importance for the shape of the contemporary international order, and the Russian ruling elites loudly and unequivocally contest this. Russia, the successor of the Soviet Union, lost a significant part of the territory, which for centuries belonged to it and was inhabited by the Russian population. According to J. Sykalski, who states after M. Nartow, that for contemporary Russia, the most important geopolitical consequences of the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc were: The loss of over 5 million square kilometres of territory (Russia territorially returned to the borders of the sixteenth century); the loss of territories that are for Russia a way to the Baltic Sea (outside Saint Petersburg and the Kaliningrad Oblast) and towards the Black Sea; the loss of a significant amount of natural resources in the Baltic, Black and Caspian seas; the 'shift' of the territory of Russia to the north and east; the loss of transport land routes connecting Russia with Central and Western Europe; the emergence of new, unstable areas on the new frontiers of the Russian Federation, where states that were often unable

to function independently in the international environment emerged (change of the external environment); regionalization of Russia as an indirect result of the collapse of the USSR (Potulski 2010, 20-21).

The collapse of the USSR, treated in terms of the unprecedented defeat of the Soviet ruling elite, resulted in systemic political confusion. In the first years, a new direction of Russian foreign policy was sought. In the mid-1990s, the idea that international reality is multipolar and that Russia should play the role of an important centre in this configuration began to prevail. It was also reflected in Russian foreign policy (Khudoley 2016, 389-390). The Russian ruling elite concluded that the Russian Federation, which is a large country, is perceived by the international community as unfriendly by nature. Therefore, no significant state in the world, and especially the United States, wanted a strong Russia because it could become a serious rival. Therefore, a more convenient Russia is the one that can be used and manipulated. Consequently, the successor of the USSR had a choice – either to fight for the status of a superpower and thus to secure such a position in the world as the United States and China, or become a big second-class state, such as India or Brazil (Trenin 2006, 87-88). For the Russian ruling elites, the choice has been unambiguous. Russia strives to shape the international order in which it will achieve the position of a global player, creating international politics.

This article aims to analyse the Russian perspective on the current international order and define its future shape based on the assumptions and specific actions in the sphere of Russian foreign policy. As the foundation of the research conducted by the author are facts and empirically perceived phenomena, the key is a positivist and post-positivist approach which includes the so-called mainstream theories, including the realism common in Russian foreign policy.

For the purposes of this study, it is particularly useful to refer to the theory of political realism, including the structural realism of Kenneth Waltz, who focuses on the study of power instruments in state policy and the balance of power in the international system (Elman 2012, 23). Waltz recognized the balance of power as a fundamental law of international relations (Waltz 1979, 117). According to the neorealists (among whom Waltz is a leading representative), the causative factor in the actions of states is the structure of the international system, and building power is treated as a means leading to the goal of survival and state security. Waltz's current view is state-centered and focused on the international system. According to the assumptions of the discussed theory, international cooperation is difficult because states are guided by the possibility of a conflict while assuming the worst-case scenario, i.e. its occurrence (Czaputowicz 2013). An additional argument justifying the reference to this theory is the fact that after the end of the Cold War, it gained the status of the intellectual mainstream, under which decision-makers analyse the international system, define the national interest and implement foreign policy (Shakleyina/Bogaturov 2004, 37-51; Więclawski 2011,

170-179). The Russian Federation expresses this in practice by contesting the current hegemonic international order, striving for its reconstruction towards a multipolar world, with the key balancing role of superpowers.

The author also used systemic and structural analysis. Assuming that the armed forces are an internally ordered system of elements with a specific structure, they are the most appropriate methods of analysis for this study.

1. Russia's Place in the World

The view of the Russian ruling elite on Russia's place in the modern world has been precisely outlined in the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. The document content proves that Russia recognizes itself as responsible for global affairs and the shaping of the international system and places itself among the centres of the modern world. At the same time, it was emphasized that the foreign policy pursued by the Federation was dictated by its national interests and was characterized by independence. At the same time, the Russian authorities are aware of Russia's special responsibility for maintaining global security. In this context, the unique role of Russia, shaped over the centuries as a balancing factor in international affairs and in the development of world civilization, was emphasized (Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013).

The document contains a provision in which Russia admits its responsibility for global affairs and influence on the formation of the international system and situates itself among the centres of the modern world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013, par 3, 4a).

Russian foreign policy researchers emphasize other important threads, including the reconstruction of the empire, strengthening military capabilities, hybrid war, economic pressure (especially by using energy resources), information war in the media and cyberspace. In this context, it is worth recalling the research of M. H. Van Herpen, the director of The Cicero Foundation in Maastricht. The message of one of his well-known publications is to draw attention to the fact that through the mentioned 'Putin wars', the Kremlin implements a secret strategy, divided into stages, designed to rebuild its position in the world (see: Van Herpen 2015).

In the same spirit, the monograph of the American expert D. E. Schoen is maintained. According to the author, V. Putin has a plan to destroy Europe's political and economic system, divide North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), gain influence in the world and marginalize the United States. In this way, Russia wants to become a global superpower (see: Schoen 2016).

The original and interesting theory regarding Russian foreign and security policy is presented by American political scientist A. Grigas. The author speaks in

a similar tone to Schoen. She acknowledges that the Russian plan to build a strategic balance was developed in detail, consistently and implemented without any major obstacles. Thus, Russia is rebuilding its empire systematically and methodically (see: Grigas 2016).

Worth mentioning is the research of the Polish author M. Minkina, which focused on the geopolitical context of rivalry between the existing power (United States) and Russia, aspiring to gain great power status. His analysis focuses mainly on identifying the interests of both states, striving to establish a qualitative and quantitative category of impact, but at the same time understanding the behaviour of the US and Russia (see: Minkina 2017).

2. Between Bipolarity and Multipolarity – a New International Order

The Russian power elites perceive international relations in a traditional way, and the essence of this approach is a realistic paradigm. In practice, this means the anarchy of the international system and struggle, or at least the competition between countries that strive to obtain the greatest possible strength, which gives them the opportunity to effectively act in the sphere of international relations and ensure the desired, high level of security (Igumnova 2011, 253-273).

In the opinion of B. Lo, in the realistic Russian thinking, there is a firm conviction that the best system to ensure international stability is a balance of power, which is the main trend of Russian thinking and is synonymous with bipolarity (Lo 2002, 103). Initially, after the end of the Cold War, Moscow – despite the collapse of the USSR – tried to seek balance, despite the fact that the gap between the newly formed Russian Federation and the United States had systematically increased in favour of the Americans. Realizing this, the Russian foreign ministers A. Kozyrev and Y. Primakov promoted the concept of transforming an unstable international reality into a stable and democratic post-confrontational world (Kozyrev 1994, 59-71). This concept argues that the dominance of the only power is harmful and impractical, and Pax Americana is unacceptable. Any imbalance leads to destabilization and a security dilemma because weaker countries will seek to strengthen themselves by acting against the stronger. In turn, a stronger entity will strengthen its power, taking advantage of its leading position. Therefore, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia rejected the emerging unipolar world with the monopoly of the United States. Putin also openly expressed this in a speech to deputies after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, recognizing that “a bipolar system of international relations used to lend stability to those relations. After that, bipolarity disappeared, the law of the strong replaced the international law” (Website of the President of Russia 2013).

In this context, be it should be emphasized that the concept of the so-called dynamics of balance has become particularly important in contemporary Russian geopolitics, which is a departure from Atlanticism and neo-Asianism. It also postulates the multipolar nature of the modern world. It should be mentioned that, for Russia, this multipolarity should have an exclusive character. In practice, it means a kind of global oligarchy, where a decision is made by a group of countries selected according to an unspecified criterion defined by Russian interests (Tsygankov 2012, 7-9).

Returning to the essence of the dynamics of balance, this approach is characterized by pragmatism, which causes that the Russian Federation is trying to implement a policy that will allow it to achieve strategic political goals. It requires maintaining a distance to various centres of strength: the European Union, the United States, and China. Russia can draw on their experiences and cooperate with them, but without submission to any of them. It is a consequence of the Russian experience in the international arena. Russian elites feel that the West not only failed to fulfil its hopes but even turned away from it, which determined the defeat of Atlanticism. In the face of China's growing strength and the economic power of Japan, the neo-Asianism concept, in which Russia was to become a Eurasian empire, has also failed (Legucka 2013).

To conclude this topic, the Russian concept of a realistic perception of international reality, including the international security environment, has been implemented in practice. Vladimir Putin acknowledged the twenty-first century as a time of Russian opportunity to rebuild the position of the great power. Under his direction, the Kremlin has worked on a plan to change the world order established after the end of the Cold War (Götz 2018, 133-153). This plan, on the one hand, assumes actions aimed at the cohesion of the West and, on the other, seeks allies sharing the Russian critical view of the current international order. The whole strategy is focused on the reconstruction of the multipolar world order.

3. The Alternative to Western Domination – a New Pole of World Order

According to the assumptions of the concept of the dynamics of balance, the Russian Federation has gravitated towards the People's Republic of China (PRC), keeping an appropriate distance. China is part of the so-called eastern vector of Russian foreign policy. It covers the territory from the Volga Region (*Povolzhye*), through Ural and Siberia, to the Pacific Ocean. This geopolitical category is often called the 'Russian East' or 'inner East' (Nuryshv 2017). The largest neighbour of Russia in the Eastern direction is China, with a 4,355 km boundary. Russia, through various

agreements in 1991-2006, settled border disputes with China. Bilateral relations after 1989 can be considered normalized and officially from 1996 as partner relations. The level of this partnership has systematically risen (Sharyshev 2016, 112-117).

Over the past thirty years, the balance of power has changed between Russia and China. In 1978, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the PRC was 40% of the GDP of the Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic alone. At present, the GDP of China exceeds five times the GDP of the Russian Federation. China exports mainly industrial goods to Russia, while Russian exports to China consist of energy resources and other raw materials. China has overtaken Russia in the field of science and technology, while the standard of living of citizens remains similar. China also increases its military potential in terms of quantity and quality. Its military budget is in second place in the world, and is increasing by about 10% annually, and is twice as high as the military budget of the Russian Federation (Trenin 2016). The Chinese armed forces also have the capability to rapidly deploy their nuclear potential.

After the annexation of the Crimea, as a result of which the West applied sanctions against Russia, and relations have become – gently speaking – tense, an intense process of bringing Moscow closer to Beijing began. It is unlikely, however, that there will be a formal alliance between these two capitals (Watts/Ledberg/Engelbrekt 2016, 427-449). Beijing rather believes that China and Russia will be able to maintain their relations in a way that will ensure a safe environment for two large neighbours so that they can achieve their development goals and mutually support each other. Both countries are playing a game in which each side tries to achieve goals and secure its prestige on the international stage (Fu 2016; Yeung/Bjelakovic 2010, 243-281).

In addition, each side recognizes that it is able to independently ensure its own security. Both consider themselves as powers and do not want to be restrained by restrictive obligations. They also believe that allied relations will have negative consequences for their bilateral relations with Washington, Tokyo, Delhi and Hanoi (Karaganov/Suslov 2018).

China, as a great Asian power, systematically challenges the US global domination. Together with Russia, they oppose the reform of the UN system, particularly the Security Council. This position is largely shared by India, Brazil and South Africa. Moscow and Beijing oppose Washington's control of the global political and financial system, seeking to reduce the world space dominated by the United States. This may result in widening the room for the manoeuvre of other states, including the Russian Federation. This is a part of the scenario of returning to the bipolar world (Gaiser/Kovac 2012, 49-63).

It is worth emphasizing here that Moscow and Beijing are implementing projects calculated to limit the global domination of the West to completely different levels. As M. Kaczmarek notes, Russia is a challenge for Western countries in the sphere

of security and defence. The author emphasizes that for several years, Russia has moved from confrontation at the narrative level to activities in the political and military sphere. This thesis is fully confirmed by the Russian intervention in Syria to defend the Bashar al-Assad regime. At the same time, it should be noted that this war reflects the assumptions of the Russian strategic culture shaped over the centuries and, contrary to the widely proclaimed arguments after the annexation of Crimea, does not confirm the fundamental changes in the Russian view of the contemporary armed conflicts (Minkina 2019, 11-12). In turn, the foundation of China's power of influence is wealth. China not only grants millions of loans but also invests dynamically in various parts of the globe. What is important, unlike in the West, it does not condition this help with the need to implement specific obligations, such as changes in the political sphere. Thus, it builds a permanent strength of influence, leaving the West far behind (Adamsky 2020, 104-125; Kaczmarek 2019, 100).

Returning to the aspect of the revival of bipolarity, it also derives from the belief of many non-Western states that one should not join the US growing hegemonic aspirations. The proof of this resistance is an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (called BRICS), as a forum for the most dynamically developing economies from outside the Western world, with – in the long term – the ability to transform the global economic system (Naik 2016).¹ BRICS countries account for 40% of the global population and 25% of the global GDP. Currently, as in the past, each country in the group is looking for greater recognition and the possibility – adequate to its potential – of influencing the course of world policy. The five major emerging national economies are handicapped by the geopolitical landscape and the distribution of power shaped after the Second World War. International institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the UN Security Council are constructed in a way that reflects the old order, in which mainly the influence and interests of Western countries were guaranteed. Although these countries are members of this international system, only Russia and China have veto rights in the Security Council. The group is slowly attempting to change this state because it often has less to say on international matters than some EU countries – France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

In view of the above, the BRICS states jointly implement projects that are to achieve such a goal. These activities include the decision taken at the BRICS summit in Brazil in 2014 on the establishment of the New Development Bank in Shanghai (Panova 2013, 91-94; Kublik 2014). This decision clearly demonstrates the dissatisfaction of the five major emerging national economies with their current position in the global economy. At the same time, the authorities of BRICS states stressed that the bank is to offer an alternative to the International Monetary Fund

¹ BRICS is the acronym for an association of five major emerging economies.

and the World Bank (Janani 2015). At the same summit, Putin announced the creation of the BRICS Energy Association. Then, under the aegis of this association, the Reserve Fuel Bank and the BRICS Energy Policy Institute could be established. Russia has high hopes in this new consortium, calling them a global forum for a new generation and a new form of multilateral diplomacy (Lavrov 2019; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019).

The five major emerging national economies' ambition is also evidenced by the constant expansion of the agenda of the summit meetings. It looks for new ways to accelerate economic development on a global scale, increase capital flow, reduce unemployment and poverty and expand export markets. In addition to economic problems, international security problems are increasingly being discussed, including the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Conclusions

BRICS members, like other countries outside the Western political and financial system, aim to create a multipolar balance of power. In practice, a bipolar structure should be expected to be formed. Therefore, one can predict the emergence of a bipolar system that is fundamentally different from the Cold War division of the world. The future system will be based on countries – excluding China – with similar political systems. Two poles will be formed. The first, composed of the traditional West, which attracted former opponents from Central and Eastern Europe and three former Soviet republics. The second pole, as already mentioned, has not been shaped yet, but its core will be the BRICS countries, with the specific role of China. It seems that the source of this pole is the direction of economic policy, building military capabilities to respond quickly in every region of the world, and the lack of consent to impose Western social and cultural values.

It should be assumed that among the BRICS members, the most active in the efforts to build this pole will be Russia and China. They are the main players who are able to effectively oppose American hegemony. Russia is the only state that can “destroy the United States within 35 minutes” (Putin *segodnya* 2017). China, on the other hand, is systematically becoming not only an economic power but also a military one. India is less willing than Russia and China to confront the West. It concentrates its efforts on its own geopolitical problems, which include political and military rivalry with China as well as a political and military conflict with neighbouring Pakistan. It can be assumed that if India engages in the construction of a bipolar system within the BRICS, it will concentrate on participating in partner economic projects while maintaining neutrality in political and military relations with the West.

Brazil, due to its location in the Western Hemisphere, hence the traditional region of the US influence, has the lowest chance to enter into a confrontation. It has little significant military potential, insufficient for effective competition in the political and military spheres. In addition, after the removal from the power of President Dilma Rousseff, an increase in the importance of political forces loyal to Washington can be seen. It is likely that the long-term leadership of the state will not be sufficiently motivated to oppose American hegemonic aspirations. Thus, its main contribution to the construction of the bipolar system will rely on partnership in building institutions and financial-economic mechanisms alternative to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The lowest potential within the BRICS group is held by South Africa. Its peripheral location does not provide significant opportunities to influence the global balance of power but is an important bridgehead of the group in the south of the African continent, a factor that is not conducive to the unification of efforts is the geographical criterion. BRICS member states are located in different parts of the globe, and the level of economic ties between them is small. And finally, it is worth noting that there are serious conflicts between some of them. China and India are sometimes balancing on the brink of war, due to a territorial dispute on the Doklam Plateau, near the border with Bhutan. These countries also compete fiercely for influence in Southeast Asia (RIA Novosti 2017).

In conclusion, the bipolar order in version 2.0 could be based either on the traditional West, or on one centre, as the USSR used to be, or on several countries – regional leaders – that would combine their capabilities and potential, including the economic, political, technological, informational and military spheres. Such a solution would satisfy the ambitions of Russian leadership aimed at changing the global balance of power. It is a strategy that assumes the distribution of the existing international order, and its implementation will allow Moscow to become a global power and ultimately end the US hegemony. It should be emphasized, however, that its effectiveness is not guaranteed because the assumptions on which it is based are primarily a derivative of nostalgia for the imperial position of Russia as the successor of the USSR. Moscow's policy should be treated in terms of the master plan, but with short-term actions conducive to this goal (Reichardt 2010, 176).

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