

## RUSSIA VS THE WEST: A WAR SCENARIO AND A NEW LOGIC OF CONFRONTATION

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How can Moscow respond to a possible US strike on Syria? Will it be forced to admit its defeat? Yes, Russia is a nuclear power, but will it decide to launch a nuclear strike because of the standoff with Americans in Syria, considering that it would be followed by retaliatory strike? The American rational choice theory can fail to estimate the options, when confronted with the Russian strategic culture and its tradition. Russians could push the red button.

The aggravation of rivalry between Russia and the West in the past few months is raising the urgent question of a possible further escalation of tensions and its forms and consequences. Political relations between Moscow and Western capitals have gone beyond the critical point. The threadbare thesis about the lack of trust can be confidently discarded. Things are much worse. The sides do not want to and cannot listen to each other. Official positions and signals are perceived as provocations and trolling. Any opinion is described from the very start as manipulation, propaganda or diversion. Pragmatic voices are sinking in the growing flow of populism. The small islands of dialogue on common issues are rapidly narrowing or disappearing altogether. Hysteria in the media, hostility and vulgarity of rhetoric far exceed Cold War levels. We have entered a new and much more dangerous stage of the conflict, a stage that did not exist several weeks ago.

The current situation is fundamentally different from what existed since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis and up to the Skripals case. The former logic of relations was obviously confrontational. The sides had sharp differences on major issues. But they continued political dialogue that was generally rational and relatively predictable. Any hostile actions against one another had a specific and more or less verifiable pretext. The exchange of sanctions was based on understandable reasons. Various incidents were thoroughly and repeatedly verified and taken with much caution. We might dislike Ukraine-related EU sanctions but Brussels carefully avoided any escalation of sanctions for "promoting propaganda and undermining democracy," an accusation that is hard to verify but easy to turn into a conflict-prone and provocative form. We might dislike Robert Mueller's investigation and the very pretext for it but it was at least systematic and relatively transparent. It was hard to suspect the EU and the US of encouraging Russia's restrictions on their food exports but, albeit unpleasant, Russian counter-sanctions had a transparent and understandable logic. Both sides were concerned over potential incidents at sea or in the air but the military actively cooperated with each other to prevent them, despite deep political differences. Apparently, in the current confrontational conditions "stable deterrence," a scenario that seemed to be the least harmful, is receding into the past.

At least three events have triggered the new logic of confrontation: the Skripal case,

Washington's new sanctions and the chemical incident in Syria. The Skripal case stands out because the collective West went for a sharp escalation without having authentic and transparent facts indicating Russia's involvement in the incident. Not a single fact meeting these requirements has been presented to the public at large so far. The theory of Russia's involvement is based on verbal lace, references to its "bad reputation" and some "secret information" whose value as evidence equals zero unless it is openly presented to the public. At the same time, more and more questions and discrepancies are arising, starting with the nature and origin of the toxic chemical and ending with the methods of its use. Symptomatically, the case of the recovering Skripals has become the subject of a growing number of jokes. However, the grotesque does not reduce the danger of it being a precedent. What if a similar provocation is staged tomorrow? What if several provocations are staged at the same time? What will our Western partners do and how will Russia react to this? Expel the remaining diplomats, including security officers and chefs? Or adopt some tougher measures?

The second event is Washington's new sanctions against Russian companies, politicians and entrepreneurs. It would seem that everyone has already got used to sanctions. However, politically today they are like a nervous cowboy from a Western comedy, who is firing his two six-shooters, whether he has to or not. Previously, new sanctions were based on a specific pretext, whereas today they are becoming similar in nature to daily carpet bombings. No doubt, they are doing harm to Russia's economy, business and citizens. But this version of sanction policy can only anger Moscow and perplex observers by the absence of any clear-cut strategy. Sanctions are losing their value as a tool of diplomacy and becoming an implement of war. Such an approach to sanctions is good for the domestic audience. Probably, it would have been rational in its own way were it not applied to a nuclear power that should hardly be overrated but certainly should not be underrated.

The third event is yet another chemical attack in Syria. This event was expected but is no less dangerous for that reason. Any objective investigation is highly unlikely under the circumstances. The sides will consider any version of events as fake, with the threat of force emerging as the only argument. And this is where the main danger lies. Today, Syria is the place where there is the greatest danger of the confrontation between Russia and the West turning into an open armed conflict. Such a scenario is easy to visualize.

Suppose another "chemical" or some other incident takes place in Syria. The "chemical" trigger looks most likely. This theme is well-covered by the media and is a serious pretext. Suppose Washington decides to use force, not just a cosmetic strike with ten or twenty Tomahawks, but a massive attack on the remaining military and civilian infrastructure of the Syrian Government. This is the scenario's first bifurcation, or the matter of Russia's involvement. Its bases can remain intact. But if Moscow uses its forces (as its military promised) a strike will be delivered at Khmeimim and Tartus. Technically it is possible to launch such a strike and destroy both bases and their military personnel, especially if US troops die during an attack on Bashar al-Assad.

This course of events could be unintentional but it could also be planned. The Russian group in Syria has done an excellent job fighting terrorists but it would be vulnerable in the event of a clash with the Americans. The TO is remotely located and it is difficult to deliver supplies. The Americans have an advantage as far as the concentration and support of their attack force is concerned. Stakes may be made on an utterly tough,

hard-hitting and humiliating defeat of Russia as the result of a lightning strike. This could be like a new 19th-century Crimean war, albeit extremely compressed in time and space.

This scenario may seem extremely risky (if not crazy) but upon closer analysis it has logic of its own. And here comes the next bifurcation. What will Moscow do, if this happens? The first option (that would be the most desirable for Washington): Russia would have to bite the dust and admit defeat. Yes, Russia is a nuclear power but will it mount a nuclear strike because of a clash with the Americans in Syria, knowing that its strike will result in retaliation? In other words, the stakes here are on the hope that Moscow will not press the button because this would mean suicide. In this scenario, victory would be on Washington's side without reservation. It will show that it is possible and necessary to cut down to size an opponent that has crossed the line. This will be a powerful signal to all the rest while America and Trump personally will gain the reputation of an uncompromising and tough player.

But there is also a second option. It is difficult to analyze it on the basis of the theory of rational choice. It may simply not work within Russia's strategic culture and tradition. The Russians may press the button. Moscow is not confined to the option of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). It can also offer a limited, albeit very painful, response. Technically this is also possible and dangerous in its own way. If, say, an aircraft carrier or a big warship is demonstratively sunk, it is Washington that risks biting the dust. But this is not in the US tradition, either. As a result, tensions will escalate, considerably increasing the risk of MAD.

This scenario may seem excessively alarmist. The consciousness of people, who lived amid the stability of the Cold War and the subsequent 30 peaceful years, naturally rejects it as unrealistic. However, history shows that disasters happen contrary to usual patterns and are merciless to their makers.

It is possible to avoid the disaster in two ways: either by starting negotiations and finding a compromise or by strengthening alliances and maintaining a balance of power. The current realities are making the second option more likely. In all probability, Moscow will continue its course towards a rapprochement with China and other players and a new model of bipolarity will take shape in the world. However, making forecasts in international relations is a thankless task. History will follow its own path, a path it alone can fathom.