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Russia in an invisible war

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How could Russia in just 20 years, without wars or other perturbations, rise from a semi-colony to an acknowledged world leader, equal among the top ones?

Kitchen “strategists”, who sincerely believe that massive nuclear strike is the universal solution to any international problem (even the hottest one, close to military confrontation), are unhappy about the moderate position of the Russian leadership in the crisis with Turkey. However, they deem insufficient even direct participation of the Russian military in the Syrian conflict. They are also dissatisfied with the Moscow’s activities on the Ukrainian front.

However, for some reason nobody asks a simple question. How did it happen that all of a sudden Russia started not just actively stand up to the world hegemonic power, but successfully win against it on all fronts?

Why now

By the end of 1990s, Russia was a state that economically and financially was at the level of the third world. An anti-oligarch rebellion was brewing in the country. It was fighting an endless and hopeless war with Chechens that spilled over to Dagestan. National security was supported only

by nukes, as to conduct any serious operation even within its own borders, the army did have neither trained personnel nor modern equipment, fleet could not sail, and aviation could not fly.

Sure enough, anybody can tell how the industry, including military, was gradually revived, how growing living standards stabilized the internal situation, how the army was modernized.

But the key question is not who did more to rebuild the Russian military: Shoygu, Serdukov, or the General Staff. The key question is not who is a better economist, Glaziev or Kudrin, and whether it would have been possible to allocate even more resources to social spending.

The key unknown factor in this task is time. How did Russia have it, why did the US give Russia time to prepare resistance, to grow economic and military muscle, to annihilate State Department-funded pro-American lobby in the politics and the media?

Why did not the open confrontation, in which we are now getting ahead of Washington, begin earlier, 10-15 years ago, when Russia had no chance to withstand sanctions? In reality, the US in the 1990s or 2000s started installing puppet regimes on the post-Soviet space, including Moscow, which was considered as one of several capitals of dismembered Russia.

Healthy conservatism of diplomats

The conditions for today's military and diplomatic successes were being built for decades on the invisible (diplomatic) front.

It must be said that among central ministries the Foreign Ministry was the first to recover from administrative mess caused by the breakup of the early 1990s. As early as in 1996, Evgeny Primakov became the Foreign Minister, who, in addition to turning the government plane around over the Atlantic upon learning about the US aggression against Yugoslavia, turned around the Russian foreign policy, which after that never followed the US course.

Two and a half years later, he recommended Igor Ivanov as his successor, who slowly (almost imperceptibly), but surely continued to strengthen the Russian diplomacy. He was succeeded in 2004 by the current foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, under whose leadership diplomacy accumulated enough resources to switch from positional defense to decisive offence.

Among these three ministers only Ivanov received The Hero Star, but I am sure that both his predecessor and successor are just as worthy of this award.

It must be said that traditional caste closeness and healthy conservatism of the diplomatic corps contributed to rapid restoration of the work of the Foreign Ministry. That very unhurriedness and traditionalism the diplomats are accused of helped. "Kozyrevshchina" (the word is derived from the name of Andrei Kozyrev, the Foreign minister in 1990-1996; the word means "acting like Kozyrev", i.e. in a subservient manner against one's own interests – translator's note) never caught on in the Foreign Ministry because it did not fit.

Period of internal consolidation

Let's return to the 1996. Russia is at the bottom of the pit economically, but the default of 1998

is still ahead. The USA totally disregards the international law replacing it with its arbitrary actions. NATO and the EU are getting ready to move to the Russian borders.

Russia has nothing to respond with. Russia (as USSR before it) can annihilate any aggressor in 20 minutes, but nobody plans to fight it. Any deviation from the Washington-approved line, any attempt to pursue an independent foreign policy would lead to economic strangulation and subsequent internal destabilization – at that time the country lives on Western credits.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that until 1999 the power is in the hands of the comprador elite beholden to the US (like the current Ukrainian one), and until 2004-2005 compradors are still fighting for power with patriotic Putin's bureaucracy. The last rearguard battle given by the loosing compradors was an attempt at a revolution in 2011 at Bolotnaya square. What would have happened if they had made their move in 2000, when they had an overwhelming advantage?

The Russian leaders needed time for internal consolidation, restoration of the economic and financial systems, ensuring their self-reliance and independence from the West, and rebuilding the modern army. Finally, Russia needed allies.

Diplomats had an almost impossible mission. It was necessary, without retreating on key issues, to consolidate the influence of Russia in post-Soviet states, ally itself with other governments resisting the US, strengthen them, if possible, all the while creating an illusion in Washington that Russia is weak and ready for strategic concessions.

The illusion of Russia's weakness

One demonstration of the fact that this task was successfully achieved are the myths that are still alive among some Western analysts and pro-American Russian "opposition". For example, if Russia opposes another instance of Western adventurism, it is "bluffing to save face", the Russian elites are totally dependent on the West because "their money is there", "Russia sells out its allies".

However, the myths of "rusty rockets that do not fly", "hungry soldiers building dachas for generals", and about "economy in tatters" are essentially gone. Only marginals believe in them, who are not really incapable, but are too afraid to acknowledge the reality.

These very illusions of weakness and readiness to back off that fooled the West into belief that the Russian question is solved and prevented it from rapid political and economic attacks on Moscow, gave the Russian leadership the precious time for reforms.

Naturally, there is never too much time, and Russia would have preferred to postpone the direct confrontation with the US, which started in 2012-13, by another 3-5 years, or even avoid it altogether, but the diplomacy won 12-15 years for the country – a huge period of time in today's rapidly changing world.

Russian diplomacy in Ukraine

To save space, I will give just one very clear example, most relevant in the current political situation.

People still blame Russia for not counteracting the US in Ukraine actively enough, for failing to create a pro-Russian “fifth column” to counterbalance the pro-American one, for working with elites, rather than with the people, etc. Let us evaluate the situation based on real capabilities, rather than wishful thinking.

Despite all references to the people, it is the elite that determines the state policy. The Ukrainian elite, in all its actions, has always been and still is anti-Russian. The difference is that the ideologically nationalistic (gradually becoming Nazi) elite was openly russophobic, whereas the economic (comprador, oligarchic) elite was simply pro-Western, but did not object to lucrative links with Russia.

I would like to remind you that not somebody else but representatives of supposedly pro-Russian Party of Regions bragged that they did not allow Russian business to Donbass. They also were the once who tried to convince the world that they are better for Euro-integration than nationalists.

The regime of Yanukovich-Azarov precipitated economic confrontation with Russia in 2013, demanding that despite signing the treaty of association with the EU Russia retained and even enhanced favorable regime with Ukraine. After all, Yanukovich and his fellows in the Party of Regions, while they had absolute power (2010-2013), supported Nazis financially, informationally, and politically. They led them from marginal niche to mainstream politics in order to have a convenient opponent in the presidential elections in 2015, while suppressing any pro-Russian informational activity (not to mention a political one).

The Ukrainian communist party, while retaining pro-Russia rhetoric, never had a shot at power, and played a role of convenient loyal opposition indirectly supporting oligarchs, channeling protest activity into venues safe for any (including current) powers.

Under these conditions, any Russian attempt to work with NGOs or to create pro-Russian media would be perceived as an encroachment on the rights of Ukrainian oligarchs to rob the country singlehandedly, which would cause a further drift of the Ukrainian officialdom towards the West viewed by Kiev as a counter-balance to Russia. The US would, quite naturally, see it as transition of Russia to direct confrontation, and would have redoubled its efforts to destabilize Russia and support pro-Western elites all over the post-Soviet space.

Neither in 2000, nor in 2004 Russia was ready to openly confront the US. Even when (not by Moscow’s choice) this happened 2013, Russia needed almost two years to mobilize its resources in order to give a strong response in Syria. The Syrian elite, in contrast to the Ukrainian one, from the very beginning (in 2011-2012) rejected the option of compromising with the West.

That is why during 12 years (from “Ukraine without Kuchma” action, which was the first unsuccessful attempt of pro-American coup in Ukraine) the Russian diplomacy worked on two

key tasks.

First, it was keeping the situation in Ukraine in unstable equilibrium; second, convincing the Ukrainian elite that the West was a danger to their wellbeing, whereas reorientation towards Russia was the only way to stabilize the situation and save the country as well as the position of the elite itself.

The first task was successfully achieved. The US has managed to switch Ukraine from the multi-directional mode into the mode of anti-Russian battering ram only by 2013, having spent enormous amount of time and resources and having acquired a regime with huge internal contradictions incapable of existing independently (without growing American support). Instead of using Ukrainian resources for their benefit, the US is forced to spend their own resources to prolong the agony of the Ukrainian statehood destroyed by the coup.

The second task has not been accomplished due to objective (independent of Russian efforts) reasons. The Ukrainian elite turned out to be totally inadequate, incapable of strategic thinking, of evaluating real risks and advantages, but living and acting under the influence of two myths.

First – the West will easily win in any confrontation with Russia and share the spoils with Ukraine. Second – no effort, except the unwavering anti-Russian position, is necessary for comfortable existence (at the expense of Western financing). In the situation of choice between orientation on Russia and survival, or siding with the West and dying, the Ukrainian elite chose death.

However, even out of negative choice of the Ukrainian elite the Russian diplomacy managed to get maximum advantage. Russia did not let itself be sucked into a confrontation with Ukrainian regime, instead forcing Kiev and the West into the grueling negotiation process on the background of a low-key civil war and excluding the USA from the Minsk format. By focusing on contradictions between Washington and the EU, Russia managed to burden the West with Ukraine financially.

As a result, initially consolidated position of Washington and Brussels disintegrated. Counting on a politico-diplomatic blitzkrieg, the European politicians were not prepared for a prolonged confrontation. The EU economy simply could not support it. In its turn, The US was not ready to accept Kiev exclusively on its own payroll.

Today, after a year and a half of efforts, the “old Europe”, which determines the position of the EU, such as Germany and France, has abandoned Ukraine completely and is looking for a way to extend a hand to Russia over the heads of the pro-American Eastern European limitrofes (Poland and Baltics). Even Warsaw, which used to be the main “advocate” of Kiev in the EU, openly (although semi-officially) hints at the possibility of dividing Ukraine, having lost the faith in the ability of the Kiev authorities to keep the country together.

In the Ukrainian political and expert community hysterics about “the treason of Europe” is growing. Former governor of the Donetsk region (appointed by the Nazi regime) and oligarch Sergey Taruta states that his country has eight months to exist. Oligarch Dmitry Firtash (who had

a reputation of the Ukrainian “king maker”) predicts disintegration as early as in the spring.

All this, quietly and imperceptibly, without using tanks and strategic aviation, was achieved by the Russian diplomacy. Achieved in a tough confrontation with the block of most powerful, militarily and economically, countries, while starting from a much weaker position and with the most peculiar allies, not all of which were or are happy about growing Russian power.

Breakthrough in the Middle East

In parallel, Russia managed to return to the Middle East, retain and develop integration within the post-Soviet space (Eurasian Economic Union), together with China roll out a Eurasian integration project (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and initiate via BRICS a global integration project.

Unfortunately, limited space does not allow us to discuss in detail all strategic actions of the Russian diplomacy for the past 20 years (from Primakov until today). A comprehensive study would take many volumes.

However, anyone who would try to answer honestly how Russia managed within 20 years, without wars or upheavals, to rise from the state of a semi-colony to the state of a recognized world leader, would have to acknowledge the contributions of many people on Smolenskaya Square (where the Foreign Ministry is located – translator’s note). Their efforts do not tolerate fuss or publicity, but without blood and victims yield results comparable to those achieved by multi-million armies in many years.