

13.06.19

RUSSIA – A GLOBAL REVISIONIST?



Experts continue to discuss who exactly is to blame for the erosion and fragmentation of the current international order. Most experts in the West tend to blame Russia. It has been dubbed the world's biggest revisionist and a destroyer of the foundations, which is, of course, an exaggeration. The West itself is staggering from domestic turmoil: elections produce unexpected results; military campaigns lead to defeat and regional crises on its borders threaten it with spillover of instability. In the end, discipline is dropping under the impact of external and internal drain in the Western Hemisphere while the former consensus on goals and values is being eroded without the participation of Russia.

Indeed, anything that is not understood and not obvious is now explained by Russia's activities. But let's write this off as a misunderstanding.

Instead, let's answer the following question: is Russia essentially a revisionist in the global system? If the latter is understood as the Western centric system of liberal democracies, the answer is yes. Russia has never – not even in the early 1990s – fully considered this system global, legitimate and efficient. Moscow considered a different system to be truly global – a global system of multilateral regulation by sovereign states with reliance on the UN and international law. It is within this system that the security interests of all states, regardless of their domestic system, were recognized and respected, the principle of non-interference in a country's domestic affairs was universal, while decision making on global issues was collective and a prerogative of the UN Security Council. In other words, in a multilateral, or to use the Russian term, polycentric world system it was necessary to consider Russia's security interests during NATO's expansion while unilateral actions like aggressive wars and invasions to support coups should be eliminated from international life.

Signs of Russia's consistent intention to rely on the said principles came from the first

Russian governments. At the CSCE conference in Stockholm in 1992, then Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev staged a real demarche by delivering a stunning speech before Western foreign ministers and MPs to the effect that NATO expansion was unacceptable because it would compel Russia to take reciprocal steps. After some time Kozyrev returned to the podium and admitted that this was a deliberate provocation to show how his successor would speak if he failed to build a constructive system of relations with the West.

Two years later Boris Yeltsin made his famous speech in Budapest about Cold Peace. He sounded similar to Kozyrev but his speech was a true political statement rather than a provocation.

The speeches made by Yeltsin in Budapest in 1994 and Putin in Munich in 2007 contain the same theme. Does this mean that Yeltsin's Russia was more revisionist than Putin's? Probably not. It is possible to generalize that Russia's vision of itself in international relations is rooted in its strategic experience and does not depend on international political cycles or the business environment. Russia's historical problem is that it is not an island. For three centuries, Russia had to maintain the world's largest national territory while remaining protected and militarily advanced. Its almost endless borders, its open East European flatlands and its numerous rivals turned Russia into one of the most active players in wars and diplomacy.

This rich, diverse and often painful experience has turned the Russian elite into natural realists that find it difficult to believe in the power of ideas and who rely more on pragmatic forecasts.

The foundations of Russian doctrine are rooted in the conviction that states are the leading players in international relations and compete against each other under conditions of anarchy; that their key resource is sovereignty and that conflicts between them are normal. Human nature is imperfect and the character of a state regime is unimportant for constructive international relations.

What, in Russia's opinion, is the guarantee of stability in international relations? It should rest on common rules of conduct fixed in international law that is supported by a balance of forces between the participants in the system. If Russia's vision of international relations is expressed as a metaphor, it would be the image of Atlases who carry the heavens on their shoulders with each Atlas representing a separate great power. Their common task is to keep the heavens intact but when they try to compete, the heavens collapse. In this system the United States is a leading Atlas who carries the heaviest part of the heavens. However, this metaphor is static – any changes in this system must be endorsed by all key Atlases. And, of course, this metaphor rules out a linear development logic: the views of the Atlases do not matter if they support the heavens.

So, is Russia a revisionist? Faced with a choice between unilateral and collective actions it most often calls for cooperation and talks. It chooses a pragmatic attitude over ideology-driven policy. It favors global stability over military supremacy. In other words, its behavior is contrary to the conduct of those who accuse it of revisionism.

Russia is not a global revisionist. It is possible to say that its strategic experience makes it a calm observer of experiments launched by more active and truly revisionist states.



Russia is convinced that revisionists lack strategic experience and are concurrently accumulating it in the course of multiple and politically unsuccessful military operations over the past few decades.

Naturally, Russia will not remain idle if its security interests are impinged upon. It will react to aggressive moves by other states, which threaten these interests. Although Moscow will be accused of revisionism in these episodes, the opposite seems more logical. Protecting its interests, Russia is upholding the world order based on sovereignty and a mutual consideration of interests.

Original publication valdaiclub.com

Source: **Russia – a Global Revisionist?**



AUTHOR



Andrey Sushentsov

President

Location: Moscow, Russia

Competence: United States, Global Trends

Field of expertise: Andrey is a leading Russian international relations scholar with a focus on American foreign policy. His research concentrates on American foreign policy in international conflicts, on South Caucasus, Ukraine, and the Middle East. He performed analytical tasks for the Presidential Administration of Russia, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Office of the Russian National Security Council, Russian Federal Space Agency, as well as other governmental bodies. In his studies, he examines the spheres of conflicting interests of Russia and the United States in Europe, the Middle East and the post-Soviet space. His key publications include monographs "America's Small Wars", "Essays on US Policy in the Regional Conflicts of the 2000s", and the collective monograph "Russia and the World in 2020". He is also an editor of the annual forecast "International Threats".

Work experience: Andrey is a director of the Laboratory of International Trends Analysis at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. He also is a Program Director of the Valdai Discussion Club, and editor-in-chief of the "Vneshnyaya Politika" (Foreign Policy) journal. He was a Visiting Professor and Research Fellow at Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins University, Guido Carli Free University of International Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Harvard University and Middlebury Institute for International Studies in Monterey. He is a member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and a member of the Working Group on the Future of Russian-American Relations.

