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MAJOR FEATURES OF THE 21ST CENTURY INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM FROM UKRAINE'S PERSPECTIVE

// Modern Geopolitics as a Challenge for International Security,
Oleksandra Kordonska, Rostyslav Romaniuk (eds.),
Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Lviv-Olsztyn 2018, 192 p. – P.13-21

The paper studies major shifts in the present international system, comparing with the late 20th century, and focuses on the processes that have influenced Ukraine the most. The existing international system is characterized by a diffusion of power among different state and non-state actors, a shift in a balance of regional and global powers, a relative weakening of established Western nations and emerging of new centers of power, increasing importance of regional integration, and return of great powers' geopolitical competition. Russia's aggression against Ukraine demonstrates that multipolar international system is more unstable and dangerous than bipolar and unipolar, and a potential of conflicts and threats to security in it has essentially increased.

Key words: international system, 21st century, multipolarity, Ukraine, Russia, China, the United States, the European Union

Висвітлюються зміни, що відбулися у сучасній міжнародній системі, порівняно з кінцем ХХ ст., здійснюється огляд її основних характеристик. Особлива увага приділяється процесам, що найбільше вплинули на Україну. Показано, що сучасна міжнародна система характеризується розпорошенням сили між різними державами і недержавними акторами, суттєвими зрушеннями у розстановці сил на міжнародній арені, відносним послабленням впливу західних держав і зростанням нових «центрів сили», посиленням значення регіональної інтеграції, поверненням геополітичної конкуренції між великими державами. Агресія Росії проти України засвідчила кризу ліберального, ґрунованого на правилах світового порядку. Сучасна багатополярна міжнародна система виявилася більш нестабільною і хиткою, ніж біполярна і однополярна, потенціал конфліктності у ній суттєво посилюється, а загрози безпеці зросли.

Ключові слова: міжнародна система, ХХІ століття, багатополярність, Україна, Росія, Китай, США, Європейський Союз

The 21st century is characterized by rapid changes in strategic environment and international relations. Existing international system noticeably differs from the late 1990s, when it experienced a revolutionary shift, caused by the collapse of the socialist camp and the Soviet Union. Since the early 21st century, fundamental transformations of the international system have occurred. Some of them have severely affected Ukraine and caused the international "Ukrainian" crisis.

The goal of the research is to describe major features of the existing international system, comparing with the late 20th century, and also the shifts that have influenced Ukraine the most.

The major features of the existing international system include: its transformation to multipolar; diffusion a power among state and non-state actors, including multinational companies, transnational crime organizations, terrorist groups, hackers-individuals; increasing importance of regional integration; a changing global balance of power; a relative weakening of established Western nations and emerging of new centers of power; more independent developing nations' position in international affairs; significant increase of China's impact on regional and global economy and politics; and a return of great powers' geopolitical competition. The role of financial and economic components of power in the post-Cold War strategic environment has sufficiently increased, as well as non-traditional threats to security.

Most of the developments were caused by acceleration of globalization as a process of growing interconnections, interactions and interdependence among nations and individuals across the globe. The end of the Cold War and revolution in the sphere of communications contributed to the developments the most. They promoted more intensive move of goods, capitals, people and ideas across borders that brought nations

of the world closer. The processes were the most visible on a regional level. Acceleration of regional integration was a prominent development of the post-Cold war period. Unlike previous periods in history, integration processes have been managed by deliberate national governments' policies and implementation of regional projects. As a result, the existing international system is more regional-based.

In the 21st century, the United States has lost its global predominance. More actors exert power and influence. Several major events and processes contributed to the shifts the most: terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001; a noticeable economic progress of some emerging economies, especially China, in the first decade of the new century; and 2008 global finance crisis and the subsequent economic slowdown, which strongly affected developed nations and favored growing China's impact in the international system.

As a result of a prolonged global war on terror after 09/11, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. essentially drained its resources and lost international leadership. Simultaneously, several nations with rich resources (territorial, human and natural) demonstrated high rates of the GDP growth in the first decade of the 21st century, before the global financial and economic crisis. Their rise was coined by the term BRICs (Brasilia, Russia, India, and China) for the most perspective "emerging powers" by Jim O'Neill, analytic of American multinational financial company Goldman Sachs¹. The term symbolized a shift in the global economic power from developed nation (the U.S., the EU and Japan) to the leading emerging economies. Foundation of a Group of Twenty (G-20) of the nations with the largest GDP, not only developed but also developing, in November 2008 as a new international forum on financial and economic affairs demonstrated a new role of the emerging economies in the global politics

The most remarkable phenomenon was China's dynamic economic growth and its increasing impact in the international system, caused primarily by economic factors. Global 2008 finance crisis did not hit China, unlike leading Western nations. Though China's economic growth slowed down, it remained rather high (approximately 7 percent). As a result, China became a major driving force of a global economy, and significantly increased its finance and economic power, regionally and globally.

China's investments in the U.S. national debt during the global finance crisis tied American and Chinese economies more closely. After the crisis, China's direct investments have been welcomed not only in developing but also developed nations, and essentially increased. China participated in foundation of some financial rescued mechanisms (in a greater East Asia, and in BRICS framework), initiated renunciation of dollar as an international reserve currency in 2009, promoted renminbi in the international trade, and called for a reform of International Monetary Fund and World Bank to increase its role in the institutions, dominated by the U.S. and other developed nations. When negotiations on the reform did not succeed, in 2015, China founded multinational financial institution – Asian infrastructure investment bank – on its own terms to address infrastructure needs across Asia. The bank has been joined by 58 nations and is open to new members. China also proposed a grand "One Belt, One Road" initiative for large-scale infrastructure projects from East Asia to Europe, which the Bank intended to finance.

According to the Brookings Institute analysis, in 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organization, despite its dynamic economic development, its global influence was limited. Transformations that occurred in 15 years did not have any analogies in history. China's GDP increased 8-fold, and it became the major driving force of the global economic development. It jumped from the sixth to second place among the most developed world economies (after the U.S.), occupied the first position in the global trade and the second one in the global investments (after Japan)².

As British "Huffington Post" neatly remarks, financing in infrastructure projects, which are keys for many nations economic development, is a powerful tool of geopolitics, the same as military alliances³. China's investments, credits, and grants to developing nations have had a remarkable political effect. Implementation of "One Belt, One Road" initiative will continue the trend, and is expecting to increase significantly China's regional and global influence.

Other BRICs nations, except China and partly India, were strongly hit by the global financial and economic crisis, and the assessments of their economic growth essentially decreased. However, the period of

¹ J.O'Neill. *Building Better Global Economic BRICs*, "Global Economics Paper" 2001, 30th November, No: 66, <http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/archive/archive-pdfs/build-better-brics.pdf> [10.09.2017].

² Philippe Le Corre and Jonathan Pollack. *China's Global Rise. Can the EU and U.S. Pursue a Coordinated Strategy?* Goeconomic and Global Issues 2016, Paper 1, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-global-rise-can-the-eu-and-u-s-pursue-a-coordinated-strategy/> [15.09.2015].

³ Parag Khanna. *New BRICS Bank: a Building Block of Alternative World Order*, 2014, Sep 17, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/parag-khanna/new-brics-bank_b_5600027.html [10.09.2017].

their noticeable growth during the years preceding the crisis gave them a feeling of their strength and a new role in the international system. In 2009, as a result of Russia initiative, the first summit of Brasilia, Russia, India and China's leaders took place to become annual. The summit established BRIC forum of the four nations as a platform for their cooperation in financial sphere and more close political relations. Admission of South Africa to the forum in 2010 changed it title into BRICS and raised its international status.

Participation in BRICS forum strengthened Russia's position and enabled it to escape international isolation after annexation of the Crimea. No one BRICS nation supported Western sanctions against Russia. Moreover, they used the situation to conclude profitable deals with Russia. In 2014-2015, they established BRICS multinational finance institutions, such as the BRICS Development Bank (the New Development Bank) and BRICS Contingent Reserve Fund.

Except BRICS, other forums and organizations were established, mostly on a regional level, without developed nations' participation, for example, "ASEAN Plus Three" or the Shanghai International Organization.

"Growth of others" and emerging new balance of power was famously described in the book "Post-American World" by American analyst Fareed Zakaria in 2008⁴. The global finance and economic crisis, and the consequent economic slowdown, significantly strengthened the trend.

The U.S. president Barack Obama (2009-2017), admitted existence of a multipolar world order, and recognized a changing U.S.' role in it. His administrations rejected a balance of power concept and great powers' geopolitical competition, and developed a new concept of multipartner (instead of multipolar) international system to address mutual threats together. The U.S. National Security Strategy of 2010 emphasized transnational non-traditional threats, including terrorism, global criminal networks, weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, attacks on cyberspace capabilities, global warming, financial crises and economic slowdown. The U.S. leadership was mostly regarded as forging collective actions of all interested nations and international coalitions to address the threats⁵.

Simultaneously, B. Obama administrations promoted all nations' compliance with international norms and rules, and their increasing responsibility in the international system, according to the growing power. The National Security Strategy of 2010 defined an important task for the United States and like-minded nations to modernize international institutions, strengthen international norms, and enforce international law. The 2015 Strategy recognized that "a shifting power dynamics creates both opportunities and risks for cooperation, as some states have been more willing than others to assume responsibilities commensurate with their greater economic capacity"⁶.

Indeed, economic progress and a relative weakening of the U.S. and the E.U.' position in the international arena encouraged some nations to more assertive foreign policy to meet their national interests at the expense of weaker neighboring states. Russia's actions in the post-Soviet area and its aggression against Ukraine demonstrate the trend the best. When Russia was weak, it could change nothing in the post-Cold War international system, which was associated with its humiliation. However, after Russia reemerged from the crisis in the early 21st century, it gained more confidence and began to claim for "a respect" from the Western powers. It was measured by their recognition of Russia's "special" interests in the post-Soviet area⁷.

Unlike Europe and other regions, Russia-led integration within a Commonwealth of the Independent Nations in 1990s failed. In the early 2000s, when Russia reemerged, new projects of regional integration (Eurasian Economic Community and Common Economic Space) were launched. An agreement on establishing of the Common Economic Space was reached in 2003, including Ukraine. However, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 hindered the process. After the Revolution, Russia's president V. Putin considered Russian-Ukrainian relations to be directly depended on Ukraine's participation in the Russia-led integration projects.

Ukraine's choice of European integration was perceived as anti-Russia's course that contributed to a development of Russia's aggressive nationalism and revisionism. During the following years, new ideological concepts were developed in Russia, including "a sovereign democracy" (2006), "Russiy mir"

⁴ F. Zakaria. *The Post-American World*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2008.

⁵ *National Security Strategy*. May 2010, p. 3, [http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2010/\[03.01.2018\]](http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2010/[03.01.2018]).

⁶ *National Security Strategy*. The White House, February 2015, p. 4, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf [03.01.2018].

⁷ B. Lo. *Russia and the New World Disorder*, Chatham House, Brookings Institution Press, London, Washington D.C. 2015, p. 48.

(2007), and “real sovereignty” (2007), which had an essential impact on its foreign policy. In February 2007 V. Putin’s Munich speech, he stated Russia’s discontent by its status in the international system. When Ukraine and Georgia claimed for NATO Membership Action Plan, Russia responded with August 2008 war with Georgia.

European Union’s expansion was one of the most important developments that influenced Russia’s policy. Importantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) and the foundation on the European Union (1992-1993) happened nearly at the same time. In 2004, the largest expansion of the E.U. occurred, including several former post-socialist and three post-Soviet nations. Though the E.U. did not demonstrate an interest in admission other post-Soviet nations, including Ukraine, the prospects were possible. In 2004, the E.U. began implementation of the European Partnership Policy. Since 2009, it has launched Eastern European Partnership program with Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan’s participation. The program was expected to lead to signing Association Agreements between the nations and the E.U., including free trade agreements. The program implementation caused Russia’s negative reaction, and was considered anti-Russian.

In Kremlin, revival of Russia’s “great power” status was associated with its leadership in the post-Soviet area regional integration, and a reconstruction of its sphere of influence. In 2011, then prime-minister V. Putin initiated foundation of the Eurasian Economic Union as the major goal of his third presidency to turn Russia into a leading center of a new multipolar international system. Its implementation entered into a conflict with the program of Eastern European Partnership, and caused a crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations in 2013, and the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in November 2013 – February 2014.

Kremlin considered Ukraine to be a key component of the Eurasian Economic Union, and demonstrated its determination to prevent Ukraine’s rapprochement with the European Union with sharp statements and actions, including gas and trade “wars”, and finally, with annexation of the Crimea and a proxy war at Donbas. The background for the actions was composed by Russia’s eagerness to use changing strategic environment on its behalf and revive its previous (Soviet times) status in the international system. Besides, Russia was interested in a return to a previous geopolitical situation, when its sphere of influence was integrated, and Europe was not. The perception resulted in pursuing a policy on weakening and disintegration of the E.U.

The U.S. National Security Strategy of 2015 admitted that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and belligerent stance toward other neighboring countries endangered international norms that had been taken for granted since the end of the Cold War⁸.

Russia refused to follow established international rules to restore its sphere of influence. The actions were a result of the shifts in the international system since the early 21st century, and caused its current crisis. No international institutions can address Russia’s aggression, firstly, because Russia is one of its leading members with a decisive voice, and, secondly, because the global balance of power has changed.

The trend was demonstrated by a vote in the United Nations on the resolution to condemn Russia’s annexation of Crimea on March 24, 2014. The vote revealed a distribution between proponents and opponents of the Western nations and Russia. 11 nations did not support the resolution, and 58, including all non-Western nations, sustained. The United Nations reaction on the similar actions in 1990 – annexation of Kuwait by Iraq – was quite different. According to Javier Solana analysis, perception of the reality in 2013-2014 was the following: American unipolar moment had ended, Europe was in decline, and the new group of nations with its unique vision of global affairs was emerging⁹.

In 2015, in accordance with Russia’s initiative, the Eurasian Union was founded, though without Ukraine. We suppose that Russia will not stop its efforts to return Ukraine into its sphere of influence. So far, Russia fires Donbas military conflict with three major interconnected goals: first, to use Donbas as a leverage for recognition of the Crimea annexation by the United States, the European Union, Japan and other nations; second, to weaken Ukraine and return it to its sphere of influence; and third, to bargain new rules in the international system, according to its interests.

A prolonged crisis of the European Union, including 2016 Great Britain’s decision to exit, reveals a complexity and vulnerability of the E.U. integration project. It also demonstrates that regional integration processes are not linear, and risk of disintegration always exists.

⁸ *National Security Strategy*, 2015, op.cit., p.10.

⁹ Javier Solana. *Grave New World*, Project Syndicate 2014, September 25, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/javier-solana-urges-the-world-s-traditional-and-emerging-powers-to-unite-to-confront-shared-challenges#vmgouCz8ha6S7OuT.99> [12.11.2017].

A struggle for power among and within many states of the Middle East and North Africa, generated in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war and 2011 Arab uprisings, is another noticeable development that affects the international system. The region is the most vulnerable to non-state terrorist groups' activities, as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has recently demonstrated. The trend will continue as non-state actors exploit the same resources and opportunities in the existing international system as national states.

The new centers of power challenged the liberal international system, shaped after the Second World War, with Western nations' decisive role. As a result, it was significantly destroyed, and a contemporary "world order" more resembles a "world disorder".

The National Security Strategy of the United States, developed by D. Trump's administration in 2017, recognizes a return of great power competition regionally and globally. It indicates China and Russia as two major strategic competitors of the U.S., which are "trying to change the international order in their favor"¹⁰. Among other factors, Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders.

The document considers the contest for power "a central continuity in history"¹¹, and the present period does not differ. Besides China and Russia as revisionist powers, the Strategy defines two other sets of rivals who are actively competing against the United States, its allies and partners in political, economic and military spheres "to shift regional balance of power in their favor"¹². They are the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, and jihadist terrorist groups and other international threat organizations.

According to the Strategy, "these are fundamentally political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies"¹³. At the same time, the document is based on a "principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology"¹⁴.

Geopolitical competition among great powers resembles the situation before the Great War of 1914-1918. However, the recent international situation is much more complex because of numerous transnational threats, which demand close nations' cooperation to address them.

The "Ukrainian" international crisis demonstrates that the United States is the last resort for the nations that do not participate in NATO or other security alliances that leaves them unprotected in the face of a larger and a stronger adversary. During the Cold War period, America repeatedly defended European nations from Soviet expansion. In our days, it has a mission to prevent Russia from imposing its will by force, and to protect and preserve a rules-based international system.

To sum up, the present international system is characterized by multipolarity, dissemination of power among state and not-state actors, relative decrease of the U.S. and other developed nations' international impact, a rise of China's as well as non-state actors role, increasing importance of regional integration, and more competitive environment, including a return to great powers' geopolitical competition. The strategic environment is very fluid. As a result, the world we live in is more unstable and dangerous than bipolar and unipolar ones. The existing international system is in the grip of a crisis, and its outcome is not clear yet. The most importantly, aggression cannot be tolerated, middle and small nations rights must be protected, as well as basic norms and rules of liberal international order. The 20th century history proves that great powers' trade-offs at the expense of weaker nations had only a temporary effect, and finally deepened the crisis.

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¹⁰ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 27 <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2017/> [03.01.2018].

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

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