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## Western consolidation and asymmetric bipolarity

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The working paper explores the factors that predetermined the Western switch from divergence to convergence in the 2020s along with the key features of the commenced consolidation within the ranks of the Collective West. Is current Western unity incidental or strategic? Is it transient or long-standing? How much do the interests of the major power centers of the Collective West diverge? How likely is this unity to extend to subsequent engagement with China as a major strategic adversary? What are the prospects for a significant number of states in the Global South to join the Western consensus? The author's analysis aims to outline a possible interdisciplinary discussion that could provide answers to these and other questions.

The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Russian International Affairs Council.

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## A New Western Cohesion and World Order

The recent prompt decisions of Helsinki and Stockholm to join the North Atlantic Alliance, as well as radical shifts in Germany's approaches to its military and political role in Europe, have become, perhaps, the most graphic illustrations of the emerging trend towards a new Western cohesion. However, there has been plenty of other evidence of the newfound unity of the West since February 24, 2022. For example, amazingly quickly agreed upon sanctions of unprecedented scope against Moscow, equally swiftly approved and also unprecedented plans of military and economic support for Ukraine, a well-coordinated offensive against Russia in leading international organizations—from the UN Security Council and APEC to the Council of Europe and the Arctic Council, joint pressure of Western leaders on the countries of the Global South that had not demonstrated full solidarity with the West on the “Ukrainian issue”—from Brazil to India, from Saudi Arabia to Mexico.

A natural question arises as to whether this cohesion is situational, that is, whether it is limited to a specific crisis in Europe, or it is strategic, that is, determined by fundamental interests of Western countries and therefore has every chance to survive and even to get stronger beyond the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In particular, what is the likelihood of the Western cohesion defining future relations of individual Western nations with China as the main strategic opponent of the West?

To some extent, sustainability of the Western cohesion depends on when and how the Russian-Ukrainian conflict ends. Many Western politicians and analysts approach the standoff between Moscow and Kyiv not as another, albeit a very large-scale regional crisis, but as an existential conflict between democracies and autocracies and, therefore, as a kind of fork in the way of the subsequent evolution of the international system at large. If the conflict is resolved on the Western terms and the Kremlin is forced to retreat without achieving its goals, such an outcome will undoubtedly become the basis for the preservation of the Western cohesion for a long time. The “victory of the West” will be a significant factor legitimizing the US leadership and will breathe new life into multilateral institutions that ensure the coordination of foreign and defense policies of Western countries. If, on the contrary, Moscow wins a landslide victory and dictates the terms of a peace agreement to Kiev, it is not difficult to foresee a heated debate in the West about “who lost Ukraine,” as well as new political frictions and divisions accompanying the debate, both within and between Western nations. Moscow's victory will mean a foreign policy defeat for the United States and will create serious problems for the Biden administration and even for its successors.

Nevertheless, the Russian special operation, which has become a powerful catalyst for centripetal trends in the West, still cannot be considered the main, and even less so—the only source of the movement of Western nations towards a new consolidation. This movement was marked long before February 24, 2022. Let's recall such events of 2021 as launching a new military-political alliance with

the participation of the United States, Great Britain and Australia (AUKUS), rapid bringing the quadrilateral Australian-Indian-American-Japanese quadruple Australian-Indian-Japanese security dialogue (QUAD) to a higher institutional level, Washington's holding of a grandiose "summit for democracy", not to mention the intensification of consolidating efforts in the traditional formats of interaction between the leading Western powers, such as NATO, EU and G7 summits. Most of these initiatives were not limited to the sole task of deterring the Kremlin. There should have been other, no less important factors that predetermined the change of centrifugal trends in the Western world to centripetal ones at the turn of the second and third decades of the XXI century.

It seems that that the West has entered a period of consolidation, which may last for at least next few years, and under certain conditions might extend to a much longer period. At the same time, however, the ongoing consolidation is still temporary, and it will inevitably be followed by another rise of intra-Western contradictions and a decreased unity within the Western world. The question of when current trends might be expected to lose steam, remains open. The immediate and medium-term prospects for world politics and the global economy largely depend on when and in what form the ongoing centripetal dynamics in the West will once again give way to centrifugal one.

## Centrifugal and Centripetal Cycles

It makes sense to talk about a certain cyclical nature of the intra-Western relations, with centripetal and centrifugal trends in such interaction periodically replace each other. The first post-war “disintegration” cycle can be attributed to the early 1970s, when US suffered a military defeat in Vietnam, abandoned the gold standard, proclaimed a course to limit American commitments abroad (the Nixon Doctrine), and then found itself in a deep domestic political crisis (Watergate). At the same time, it was the time of a rapid economic rise in Japan and the expansion of the EEC. In the early 1970s, Great Britain, Denmark and Ireland joined the Community, and later negotiations began on the accession of Greece, Portugal and Spain to the EEC against the background of internal political changes in these countries. The interests of the three main centers of Western power began to diverge more and more clearly on many important issues, raising doubts about the sustainability of both American leadership and the Western unity as a whole.

To counter the centrifugal trends Western leaders attempted to introduce more elements of multilateralism into their interaction and to find new mechanisms for converging the interests of the United States and its allies. The Tripartite Commission was established, followed by the Group of Six, which quickly became the Group of Seven. The coming to power in the United States of the administration of Ronald Reagan allowed US to get out of the protracted political and economic crisis of the 1970s, to unite American society and to strengthen the leadership position of the United States in the Western world. The accelerating decline of the Soviet Union, which ended with the collapse of the world socialist system in 1989 and the disintegration of the USSR itself in 1991, also contributed to restoring the Western cohesion.

The next “disintegration” cycle started, apparently, about two decades ago (2003), when the military intervention of the United States and some of its allies in Iraq split the Western world, putting the Anglo-Saxon coalition against much of the continental Europe, including France and Germany. Although this split did not lead to a long-term confrontation between the United States and continental Europe, it clearly outlined the limits of the “unipolar world”.

Centrifugal tendencies intensified during the administration of Barack Obama, which for the first time publicly announced the shift of the main US foreign policy priorities from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region, giving its European partners the opportunity to play a more active role both on the “Eastern flank” of the West (former Soviet republics) and in the “Southern neighborhood” zone (the Middle East and North Africa).

The efficiency of such a geographical distribution of power of the West is still the subject of disputes among historians, but one can confidently state that the initial cracks in relations between the United States and its allies, which manifested themselves during the two terms of Barack Obama (2009–2016), sharply deepened during the years of Donald Trump (2017–2020). Over the years, the

divergence of US and its closest allies on such fundamental issues as the energy transition, the Iranian nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian settlement, economic assistance to the countries of the Global South and many others became explicit and even demonstrative. Trade and economic contradictions worsened, which ultimately put the United States and the European Union on the brink of a trade war. In the area of security, the Trump administration tried to act as a provider of commercial services, insisting on increased payments for these services by multiple US “customers” around the globe.

New “unifying” trends in the Western world have been observed for at least the past two years. If one takes as a starting point the first months of 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic that hit the world unexpectedly awakened the most archaic reflexes of national egoism in the West and at one point even called into question the existence of common Western values as such, then it should be recognized that in two and a half years a lot has changed for the better in the Western world. The West has been able to draw appropriate lessons from its past difficulties, to mobilize itself quickly and generally successfully, to prevent a new offensive of right-wing (and in some countries—left-wing) populists, to put aside the many squabbles and squabbles of recent decades and to form a united front against common opponents and competitors.

An important role in the ongoing consolidation was played by the Democratic Administration of Joe Biden. During the election campaign, the Democratic candidate spoke a lot about the task of “reuniting the West” as one of the main priorities of his future foreign policy. He also invariably promised that the new US leadership would take into account positions, interests and priorities of US allies to the maximum extent, and that his administration would favor multilateral formats of engagement with its partners.

His Administration has not always and consistently lived up to this promise. American-style multilateralism remained very specific even after the departure of Donald Trump from the White House. For example, the decision to hastily withdraw American troops from Afghanistan at the end of the summer of 2021, as far as can be judged, was made without prior consultations with allies and naturally caused discontent and even deaf grumbling among the latter. It turned out to be impossible to immediately build European allies against Beijing, as evidenced by the rare and somewhat ambiguous references to Beijing in the final communiqué of the Brussels NATO summit held in June of 2021. Until February 2022, there were serious differences between Washington and Berlin on the prospects for energy cooperation with Moscow. There is still no complete consensus between the United States and the “European troika” (Great Britain, France, Germany) on all issues of restoring the multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran.

However, these tactical failures did not lead to new deep splits within the Western world and did not change the general vector of the West’s movement towards greater cohesion. The new attitudes of the White House coincided with the expectations and hopes of US allies in Europe and East Asia, who for the most part did not approve of the foreign policy course of Donald Trump; during the Presidential



election campaign of 2020, they bet on Joe Biden and unequivocally welcomed the “revival of American leadership” in the Western world. Manifestations of US insensitivity to the interests of its allies or evidence of the preservation of the inertia of the foreign policy legacy of the previous Administration could not stop the general movement towards consolidation.

# The roots of Today's Cohesion

Apparently, this movement was primarily due to the growing awareness of the political elites of Western countries of numerous risks arising from the continuing disunity of the Western world. The divided West has been steadily losing important economic, political and geostrategic positions in the international system over the past few years. Moreover, the West was increasingly losing its former status as a symbol of the “preferred future” and a role model for the rest of the planet; Western patterns of development were increasingly associated mainly with unresolved social and economic problems, rather than with past achievements. Politicians and experts spoke of the “post-Western” world not as a potentially possible prospect for the evolution of world politics and the global economy, but as a reality that has already come.

This trend towards the “demythologization” of the West was further articulated during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020–2021, but it had started much earlier—when the West revealed its inability to reform the global financial system after the global crisis of 2008–2009, to find a convincing answer to the challenge of the “Arab Spring” of 2011–2012, to prevent the UK’s exit from the European Union (2016), etc. Against the background of triumphant sentiments of the late 1990s and early 2000s, these failures were perceived as especially painful. The instinct of self-preservation called for consolidation, which over time began to push tactical differences and current disagreements to the background.

The first twenty years of the XXI century demonstrated the continued unwillingness of the political elites of the European and Asian allies of the United States to take more responsibility for the state of the international system and for the future world order. The statements about the “strategic autonomy” for the European Union, which came from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron for many years, remained for the most part general declarations, especially with regard to security issues. In the first twenty years of the century, a plausible alternative to the US leadership has not been found in Europe or in East Asia, despite numerous statements about the urgent need for such an alternative. Therefore, the coming to power in the United States of Joe Biden was cheered by many in the West as a return to the usual and natural state of affairs that had emerged in the early period of the Cold War.

Of course, unlike during the Cold War, the main challenge for the West today is China, not Russia, and it is the “Chinese challenge” that feeds the movement towards consolidation and cohesion. Not surprisingly, Joe Biden already in 2021 made an attempt to negotiate with Moscow, quickly agreeing to the extension of the bilateral New START, and then meeting with Vladimir Putin in Geneva in June 2021, whereas a face-to-face bilateral US-China summit in 2021 never happened. Apparently, the White House planned to achieve some kind of stabilization of relations with Russia, to reduce risks and costs of the US-Russian confrontation and to focus on dealing with China as a more dangerous strategic competitor of the United States.

It is unlikely that the White House could have counted on Moscow abandoning its strategic partnership with Beijing or on launching a new “reset” in US-Russian relations, but the task of minimizing the costs associated with this relationship was certainly set. Overall, most US allies in Asia and Europe supported this prioritization, with the exception of a small number of Central and Eastern European states that had traditionally pushed Moscow rather than Beijing as the main threat to the West. In parallel with Washington’s efforts throughout 2021, several attempts were made by the European Union to find new areas of common interests with Russia, in particular, in the field of “energy transition” and fifth-generation information and communication technologies.

However, the approach based on the principle of “fix relations with Moscow and focus on Beijing” in the end was unsuccessful. First, Moscow did not show readiness to “fix relations” on US terms and the list of Russian claims and demands to Washington and to the West as a whole after the Geneva summit continued to grow. At the end of 2021, Russia demanded a radical overhaul of Europe’s security system that emerged over the past twenty years, based on the central role of the United States and NATO in the system. Naturally, concessions of this magnitude were unacceptable neither to Washington nor to its European allies. In addition, identified throughout 2021 trends in Russia’s domestic political transformation, which were increasingly leading the country away from the standards of Western-style liberal democracy, also impeded even a limited Russian-Western rapprochement.

Second, as noted above, the Biden Administration failed to immediately set up its allies and partners for a long-term and uncompromising struggle against Beijing. This was evidenced, in particular, by the more than restrained reaction of the majority of EU member states to the diplomatic conflict between Vilnius and Beijing in late summer—early fall of 2021. Although throughout 2021, most European countries and, first of all, such major powers as Germany, France and UK, gradually tightened their policy toward China (an indicator of which was, in particular, the decision to freeze the ratification of the comprehensive investment agreement with China signed by the European Union at the end of 2020), Europe as a whole continued to lag behind the United States in its willingness to confront China decisively.

Accordingly, it was necessary to revise, if not the overall strategy, then at least the tactics of the Western consolidation. What was needed was some kind of strong shock to help hasten the unification of the West and help bridge the lingering differences on specific issues. For a variety of reasons, the coronavirus pandemic and the economic turmoil it provoked did not come as such a shock, nor did the inglorious conclusion of a twenty-year NATO operation in Afghanistan. In this sense, the beginning of Moscow’s special military operation on February 24, 2022, became a long-awaited and literally unvaluable gift for Washington, allowing American strategists—albeit for a while—to take away the role of the world’s main villain and unifier of the West from Beijing and to handle it over to Moscow. The special operation provided an opportunity to fix not only the immediate common goals, but also the priority formats of the new unification of the West. The White House has tried to make the most of this gift of fate.

It is worth noting that, despite all the drama and monumental international consequences of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is China, and not Russia, that is still considered by US politicians as the main strategic challenge and threat to the national interests of the United States, and the West as a whole. The “pacification” of Moscow does not remove the task of the subsequent “taming” of Beijing from the agenda, but serves as an important step towards approaching this larger problem. Moreover, the Russian special operation forced many previously wavering Western countries to take a fresh look not only at Moscow, but also at Beijing. Persistent attempts of the Chinese leadership to stay away from the unfolding conflict, emphasizing the fundamental differences between Ukraine and Taiwan, are not likely to prevent further consolidation of the West in confronting Beijing in the waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

## Manifestations of the Unity

The beginning of the consolidation of the West is along the line of strengthening its security cohesion. This trend takes place both within the framework of the revived North Atlantic Alliance, and in other multilateral formats, as well as through bilateral agreements between the United States and its main security partners. NATO member countries' total military budgets already account for more than half of global defense spending, and in the near future this share will only grow. The lessons of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict are carefully studied, including the assessment of the performance of Western weapons supplied to Ukraine; on the basis of the study, appropriate adjustments will be made to the ongoing modernization plans for the armed forces of Western countries.

The main stake seems to be placed primarily on maintaining critical technological advantages of the West over its geopolitical opponents (Moscow and Beijing), as well as on further expansion of the global infrastructure of multilateral and bilateral security alliances under the auspices of the United States. The trend towards “globalization” of NATO is likely to gain speed—this bloc will increase its military presence both in the Arctic region and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. There is a clear trend towards greater coordination among U.S. allies and partners in Europe and in Asia, and there is every reason to believe that US will actively encourage such transcontinental coordination further by building a dense net of bilateral and multilateral partnerships and alliances of various types.

Of course, not all European members of NATO are ready to fully support US in the upcoming confrontation with China. For instance, Germany is likely to confine itself to a symbolic military presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. But a sharp increase in Germany's military spending, aimed at containing Moscow, will pave the way for a corresponding redistribution of roles and resources in the North Atlantic Alliance, allowing other countries—in particular, Great Britain and France—to strengthen their support for the United States in regions of the world far away from Europe. Specific mechanisms and regimes for such a redistribution of roles within the West remain unclear; nevertheless, there is every reason to assume that in the coming years they will be vigorously worked out and tested.

The United States will be the main beneficiary of unifying trends; the dominant position of the United States in world arms markets will be significantly strengthened, and the ideas of the European Union's “strategic autonomy” from NATO will have to be postponed until better times. The information war against Russia, which has entered a new phase after February 24, 2022, has as one of its goals the discrediting of Russian weapons as “obsolete” and “ineffective”, which should, in turn, lead to the redistribution of world arms markets in favor of US defense sector.

However, it's not just a fight against Russian or Chinese arms manufacturers. The ongoing consolidation strengthens the US defense sector vis-a-vis their EU competitors. In theory, the growth of EU countries' military spendings could lead to a

consolidation of large European arms producers, increasing the competitiveness of EU exporters in world arms markets. In practice, such a prospect does not look very likely: strengthening the positions of the EU defense complex in global markets and even in its own European markets is hardly possible without the European Union achieving a significant “strategic autonomy” from the United States. The consolidation of the West in the security domain will go on US terms and mainly in US interests. Under the current conditions, only Germany has real opportunities to significantly increase the export of its weapons, and even for Germany there are constraints as far as the most modern and most expensive systems are concerned.

The US positions vis-à-vis its partners will also get stronger in the foreign policy domain. Although the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has led, among other things, to the strengthening of the sense of EU unity, this unity is unlikely to turn EU into a truly global player. It seems more likely that Brussels will fix itself on a predominantly regional (European) agenda without attempts to pursue its own, different from US, strategy in the South or East Asia. EU may well get more active in Africa or in the Middle East, but this is because both regions might remain on the periphery of US interests.

In the economic domain, one can predict vigorous efforts to resolve or at least to mitigate existing trade and financial contradictions within the West—first of all, between the United States and the European Union, as well as between the United States and its main trading partners in East Asia (Japan and South Korea). The Biden Administration has already demonstrated a willingness to show more flexibility and a penchant for compromise than Donald Trump’s team. For example, in October of 2021, US lifted part of the import tariffs imposed by Donald Trump on EU steel and aluminum. It can be assumed that the long-promised synchronization of export controls in relation to third countries, primarily China and Russia, will soon take place. Perhaps, one will see an end to the almost endless conflict between Boeing and Airbus, as well as in some other high-profile trade disputes that undermine the transatlantic cohesion.

Priorities in cooperation between Western countries will increasingly include strategic R&D. New multilateral R&D consortia are going to emerge in key areas of ICT, AI, in space and biotechnologies, in green energy and other fields. Most of these consortia will be led in one way or another by US corporations, although leadership of partners from Europe or East Asia in some specific fields cannot be ruled out. One of the most important goals of cooperation in R&D will be to preserve the leadership of the West in determining technical standards in the main directions of Industry 4.0. In building new technological chains, priority will be given to considerations of national security and minimization of political risks, and only in the second place—to considerations of economic feasibility and commercial efficiency. Opportunities for deep integration between Western and Chinese high-tech corporations, including joint R&D, are likely to shrink even if a full-blown trade war between Washington and Beijing is prevented.

The cohesive and self-confident collective West will undoubtedly aspire to maintain unified positions on the main questions of global development. This

applies to such issues as climate change, energy transition, Internet governance, global standards for digitalization, food security, prevention of new pandemics, cross-border migrations, gender and racial equality, protection of minority rights, social and economic discrepancies within and between countries. Determining the future development agenda is becoming one of the key parameters for restoring the overall Western moral leadership in world politics. It is possible that EU, rather than US, will take the lead on many issues of global development, but without direct or indirect American support promoting these issues within the international community will be difficult.

In any case, Western politicians, opinion leaders, experts will try to sell their agenda in all these areas on the rest of the world with renewed perseverance. The concept of a “rule based” world order will be elaborated further, but it will continue to imply that a group of Western countries develops a set of principles and norms for the behavior of states in a particular sphere, and then these norms and principles gradually spread to other actors of world politics and the economy. Countries not ready to follow the “rules of conduct” established by the West, will be pushed to the periphery of the international system. The West is likely to proceed from the fact that the geopolitical opponents of the United States and its allies in any case will not be able to offer effective comprehensive alternatives to the “rule based” world order, and therefore sooner or later will have to adapt to the standards offered by the West.

The consolidation of the Western world can hardly do without attempts to push the boundaries of this world beyond the “historical West”. The main battleground is likely to remain East Asia, where the United States is under the most pressure from China. But, of course, the confrontation with China and Russia will not be limited to any specific geographical theater. One can foresee a continuous fight for the “souls” of countries like India, Indonesia, Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. Large-scale regional and even continental projects will be developed and implemented to link parts of the Global South (the Middle East, South-East Asia, North Africa, the Caribbean) to the West. There may be attempts to recruit new members to multilateral structures as AUKUS, Five Eyes and Quad.

While setting itself the task of weakening Russia and isolating China, the West inevitably faces a contradiction between the proclaimed ideological purity and the needs of political expediency. This contradiction is particularly explicit in regions of the world where Western-style liberal democracy is not popular and local attitudes to human rights are controversial, to say the least. The Biden Administration, with its emphasis on values, has already faced significant challenges in dealing with its partners in regions such as the Middle East, South-East Asia and North Africa. This contradiction, as has happened many times in the past, will most often be resolved in favor of political expediency—though a complete rejection of liberal values as the basis of Western cohesion will not happen in the near future.

For apparent reasons, Western leaders will draw the main dividing line in world politics not between “democracies” and “autocracies”, but between “responsible”

and “irresponsible” players on the world stage. Such an approach can be used even in attempts to reach tactical compromises with China and to obstruct deepening of the Moscow-Beijing partnership. Geopolitical opponents of the West from Russia to Iran to North Korea to Nicaragua will be situationally included in the category of “irresponsible” players, and this list will be constantly updated depending on the specific political needs of the West. It is clearly more appropriate for the West to deal with its opponents not in parallel, but in sequence, step by step expanding the Western geopolitical space and, accordingly, narrowing this space for the Western opponents.



## Impact on the World Order

If the cohesion of the West turns out to be sustainable and continues in the coming years, it should inevitably have a number of significant consequences for the system of international relations. Consolidation of a large group of European and East Asian nations around US postpones for a long time the prospects for a “mature” multipolarity (polycentrism) in the international system. While multipolarity implies the relative equidistance of the independent global centers of power from each other, as well as the comparability of their military, economic, technological, etc. potentials, consolidation of the West should result with the creation of a “supercenter” of power, obviously superior to all other actors in world politics in all of the main parameters of influence on the international system.

Multipolarity also implies flexibility of geopolitical alliances and coalitions—in case of an excessive strengthening of one of the poles of power, the rest are grouped in such a way as to prevent the domination of a single hegemon. The emerging consolidation does not imply such flexibility within the West—it is hard to imagine in the foreseeable future a scenario in which the EU unites with Russia in countering the United States, or Washington blocks with Beijing to limit the activity of Brussels.

While references to multipolarity (and its attendant multilateralism) will continue to be an important part of Western political rhetoric, the efforts of Biden Administration and its allies in Europe and East Asia are aimed at recreating, in one form or another, a model based on an asymmetric interaction between the “global core” (the West) with the “global periphery” (the Rest) with the gradual expansion of the core at the expense of the periphery. That is, the goal is to return, as far as possible, to the situation that existed in the international system at the turn of the XX and the XXI centuries.

As some twenty years ago, it is assumed that such a binary division of the international system into the “core” and “periphery” will not necessarily lead to a classical bipolar world, since the global periphery will not have the capacity or the will to unite against the consolidated West. On the contrary, large countries of the “non-West” (India, Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, etc.) will have to compete with each other in one way or another for the favorable conditions for its subsequent entry into the “global core”. The potential rallying of the “non-West” around China or Russia is clearly not a matter of the very immediate future, and besides, the consolidated West retains many diverse opportunities to effectively counteract this process. In this logic, associations of countries that are not a part of the “global core” (SCO, BRICS, EAEU, etc.) are based mainly on the overlap of opportunistic interests of participating countries, and therefore do not have a long-term strategic perspective. Such associations will not be able to act as effective centers of strategic consolidation of the non-Western world. And this means that the “global periphery”, even far surpassing the West in population, resource base and even economic potential, will still not be in a position to compete with the Western world.

According to the optimistic forecasts made by the strategists of the new consolidation of the West, in the foreseeable future, the economic, technological, political and cultural dependence of the world ‘periphery’ on the world “core” will not only continue, but will also increase even more as the processes of globalization resume, which were only temporarily suspended by numerous crises of recent years. The technological superiority of the West over the Global South will allow Western countries to determine the parameters for the development of key sectors of the latter, for example, critically important agriculture. The West’s advantages in “soft power” will be all the more significant the more stable the overall international system turns out to be. If it is possible to prevent the inevitable regional crises in the “periphery” from escalating to the level of global conflicts, then the system of world politics will be considered relatively stable—at least in the medium-term future.

The return of a “unipolar world” does not necessarily mean that the West should refuse any concessions to the Global South in the field of economy, finance, in approaching sustainable development problems and in democratizing the international system as a whole. However, these concessions will be not so much the result of the growing pressure of the South on the West, but more a goodwill decision of the West, aimed at avoiding undesirable destabilization of the “periphery” and at preventing the import of instability from the South. Therefore, the adjustments will be strictly measured and conditional on reciprocal commitments from the Global South (for example, an increase in economic assistance to developing nations might be conditioned by their cooperation with the West in restricting migration flows from the South to the North or appropriate pledges in matters of human rights).

Relations between the West and the Global South in this scenario will remain complex and sometimes conflictual, but in general, it is the West that will remain the leading power in this bundle. The world ‘periphery’ in this logic does not have a full-fledged international subjectivity, and therefore needs elements of external governance by “mature” states and societies. Pushing Russia and then China to the margins of world politics and the economy will make it possible to restore the past monopoly of the Western models of modernization, even more firmly tying the global “periphery” to the global “core”.

Gradual expansion of the existing military and political blocs, manifested in the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, will continue; new members, for example, can join AUKUS. However, it seems more likely that less formalized multilateral associations such as QUAD will start playing a more active role in security matters. The containment of China will remain the prime goal of these institutions, but their agendas are likely to get more diverse and inclusive over time, expanding to multiple matters of “soft security” and development.

The West might also try to rebalance the roles of certain multilateral organizations—for instance, to de-facto replace G20 with G7 as the main platform for discussing matters of global economy and finance. The functions of G20 will be reduced mainly to the approval of decisions prepared within G7. The latter may

co-opt new members as necessary or, more likely, invite individual countries of the Global South as observers to discussions of specific issues. Naturally, such a strategy would have a chance of success only if the West manages to present G7 not as a closed club of Western democracies, but as a global laboratory, where universal rules of the game that meet common interests of all participants to international relations will be worked out.

In order to get back to the old “unipolar world”, the West will have to handle the China challenge. The extent of the West’s willingness to make economic and political compromises with Beijing remains unclear, and it is likely that they will be determined by the emerging balance of powers in specific areas of competition. Still, it seems that the Western strategy will in any case imply three goals: weakening Russia, isolating China, preventing the onset of the “Asian century”, and exactly in this sequence. Achieving the first goal facilitates movement in the direction of the second, and the implementation of the second almost guarantees the achievement of the third.

In the West, there is no shortage of predictions regarding the inevitable slowdown of the Chinese economy, the growth of social tensions and political risks within China and the ultimate unsustainability of the Chinese economic and social model. If time does not play on the China’s side, no long-term arrangements and compromises with Beijing are in the interests of the West since the forthcoming changes in the dynamics in the balance of powers with China will sooner or later give the West additional tangible advantages in competition with its strategic adversary. The ongoing restructuring of the Chinese economy, profound social and demographic shifts taking place in China, Chinese continuous participation in globalization—all this, it is argued, sooner or later should lead to some form of liberalization of the Chinese political system. As a result, China will be forced to play by the “Western” rules and obey the general logic of the resurrected ‘unipolar’ world. Failure to liberalize, it is argued, would inevitably lead to a fading of China’s economic growth, an aggravation of socio-economic problems and the inevitable defeat of Beijing in economic and technological competition with the West.

If the West-China competition is a long-term game, then the main tactical task of the moment is to preserve the Western cohesion in dealing with the Middle Kingdom and, above all, to prevent any “separate deals” that the European allies of the United States could try to make in their interaction with Beijing. Accordingly, Washington should make maximum use of existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms at its disposal to fix the current tightening of European approaches to China and to prevent any possible unsolicited “détente” in relations between Brussels and Beijing.

In this renewed “unipolar” environment, Russia will find itself relegated to the starting positions it held thirty years ago, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But its position will be even more difficult, because Moscow in the foreseeable future will not regain the “credit of trust” from the West that it had in the last decade of the XX century. The pressure on Russia will be stronger than it was

in 1990s, and potential political and economic bonuses for the “good behavior” of the Russian side—if any—will be more modest and delayed in time. Nevertheless, sooner or later Russia will also be integrated into the West and used by the latter as a significant additional resource in the long-term confrontation with China.

Until this happens, the maximum geopolitical, military-strategic, economic and even humanitarian weakening of Moscow will remain one of the main priorities of the West. This will imply the consistent ousting of Russia from global and regional multilateral organizations, the curtailment of economic, scientific and technical ties with Moscow, the preservation of pressure on countries seeking to maintain cooperation with Russia in one way or another. The main task of the West’s information offensive against Moscow will be to change the attitude towards Russia on the part of those states of the Global South—from India and Indonesia to Egypt and Algeria—where this attitude remains generally positive.

At the same time, the West should be ready to maintain a minimum of contacts, primarily in strategic arms control and in reducing the risks of a direct military clash with the Kremlin. Beyond that, main hopes will be pinned on the inevitability of a change in the political leadership and, moreover, the political system in Russia under growing external pressures and in the context of mounting internal problems. Minimizing Moscow’s international political role should become an additional instrument of pressure on Beijing, which will have to confront the strengthened and cohesive West virtually alone.

This is the most general picture of “desirable future” based on the idea of the West’s historical revenge for the geopolitical retreats and defeats of the past two decades. Naturally, at the level of political rhetoric, this picture looks somewhat different: its fundamental elements seem to be compliance with universal norms of international law, respect for basic human rights, ensuring effective global governance, inclusiveness and representativeness of multilateral international organizations, joint work on common problems of security and development for all the humankind. Nevertheless, this picture is based on not a very original idea of restoring unconditional international leadership of the West in general and of the United States in particular.

## Limitations of Current Trends

How realistic is the scenario of not only preserving, but also further strengthening the cohesion of the West as the basis of the future international system? It seems that the ongoing process of the Western consolidation has significant potential to proceed further, but it also has its limitations, which casts doubts about sustainability over a historically long time.

Although many previous conflicts and quarrels within the Western world were put on a backburner after the Biden Administration got to power in US, the deep roots of these conflicts and quarrels are still there. The odds are that sooner or later the roots will generate new sprouts. It is worth noting that the previous consolidation cycle of the end of the XX century had stronger foundations than the current cycle. At that time, at the foundation of Western cohesion was liberal triumphalism, the deep belief within Western elites in their historical rightness and in the universal applicability of Western values. The current consolidation cycle is based more on a fear of the growing power of China and of Russia's adventurism. Most Western leaders today do not have the same confidence in the inevitable triumph of liberal values, even within their own countries. That gives reasons to doubt that the newly found cohesion of the West will turn out to be as lasting as it was in the previous cycle.

Several factors are challenging the cohesion. First, economic interests of US, the European Union, and the developed countries of East Asia do not converge on everything. For example, disputes over US agricultural exports to Europe is unlikely to find an "ultimate" solution; the same can be applied to European auto and parts exports to US. Dollar and the euro will continue to compete against each other in global financial markets, and this competition is likely to intensify in the face of the strengthening of other currencies in global finance. In a more general sense, the ability of US to rely indefinitely on external borrowing and to constantly increase its national debt is questionable.

The feasibility of synchronizing political cycles among individual Western countries is also questionable. If the left-wing forces are currently on offensive in the North of Europe, then in the United States in the upcoming midterm elections in November, most likely, victory will be on the side of the right. One of the clear indicators of the upcoming "undocking" of political trends in US and in EU was the decision of the US Supreme Court at the end of June 2022 to abolish the constitutional right of women to abortion and the extremely nervous reaction to this decision on the part of leading European statesmen.

The differences between the "Anglo-Saxon" and "continental European" models of social and economic development do not disappear over time, but become more significant; attempts by some countries of continental Europe to use at home social and economic recipes borrowed from US and UK, as a rule, end in failure. The changing ethnic and demographic picture in individual states of the West also feeds problems in maintaining common foreign policy priorities.

Political differences within the West have not disappeared over the last two years. It is one thing to unite situationally against the backdrop of an acute security crisis against a familiar opponent—namely, against economically relatively insignificant Moscow, and quite another to be ready to wage a long-term exhausting struggle with an economic superpower such as China. There is no complete unity within the West on the optimal strategy towards India, let alone positions on specific issues of crisis management in the MENA region. It is hard to imagine that US and EU will achieve a complete unity of views on expanding economic assistance to the Global South.

The ability of the West to achieve full long-term political and economic isolation of Russia is also questionable. The world's reaction to Moscow's military special operation has been mixed, and the sustainability of the anti-Russian consensus is far from certain. As the Ukrainian crisis moves away from the front pages of publications and from the TV screens, it will become increasingly difficult to maintain the Western cohesion, and hidden or even overt dissidents will appear among Western countries. After the end of the military phase of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, even if this phase is not followed by a comprehensive political settlement, disagreements on how to build future relations with Moscow are likely to deepen.

Since the burden of anti-Russian sanctions is not evenly distributed between the United States and Europe, it is easy to predict a gradual increase in disagreements between the two shores of the Atlantic on this issue. These disagreements will become especially significant if the Russian-Ukrainian conflict becomes a catalyst of a broader crisis in the global economy and finances or requires significant additional sacrifices on the part of US and its allies in order to prevent a military victory for the Kremlin.

Further differences between US and its allies on the optimal military posture of the West cannot be ruled out either. If some influential American politicians consider the prospect of a limited nuclear conflict between Russia and NATO as acceptable, albeit highly undesirable, then in Europe they tend to be more cautious in this matter, since it is the European continent that has the highest chances of being the theater for a tactical nuclear weapons exchange.

Even more challenging is the task of economically and technologically containing China. Attempts to isolate Beijing by severing economic, scientific and technological ties with China, will inevitably lead to growing costs for the West itself. Beijing is closely watching the decisions of the West regarding sanctions against Russia, and today they are beginning to take preventive measures to minimize the consequences of the possible application of similar sanctions against China. The current crisis, although it revealed some differences between Moscow and Beijing on specific issues of world politics, nevertheless turned out to be an additional catalyst for Russian-Chinese cooperation in various fields and gave China additional opportunities in countering the United States and the West at large. Most experts predict that as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict fades into the background of world politics, giving way to other crises and problems, political and economic Beijing's support for Moscow is likely to increase.

US intentions to isolate China in the Indo-Pacific region, where China remains the leading trading and investment partner for most local economies, looks unrealistic. At the moment, Washington is not ready to fully open US markets to Asian nations, and is neither in a position to challenge Beijing in implementing large infrastructure projects in Asia. US does have at its disposal many tariff, technological, monetary and other bonuses that it could offer to its partners in the Indo-Pacific, but the provision of these bonuses is inevitably constrained by the domestic weakness of the Biden Administration and the protectionist moods within the Republican Party. In addition, Asian countries cannot be sure that the US approaches to international economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific will not change after the 2024 Presidential election. In sum, US and even the West as a whole are not able to offer Asian countries a superior alternative to the Chinese “One Belt, One Road” project.

As for the consolidating effect of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, this effect is likely to go down over time. As cynical as it may sound, the public is getting used to unresolved military conflicts, especially if these conflicts have limited impact on vital national interests. Events on the territory of Ukraine will be increasingly perceived as a regional problem, rather than as a global challenge to the West. It does mean that the Western public will turn pro-Russian anytime soon; however, the conflict in Ukraine as an instrument of political mobilization has a rather short expiration date.

Still, the most dangerous challenge to the Western cohesion is internal, not external. The West at large and, above all, US confront a number of fundamental economic, social and political problems, which have not been properly addressed. Western societies remain divided along many economic, political, social and other lines, and prospects for restoring internal unity remain dim. And this, in turn, undermines the possibility of pursuing a long-term and consistent foreign policy, which is necessary, among other things, to preserve the Western cohesion. In this regard, the situation today is significantly different from the state of affairs in the world in late 1990s—early 2000s, when there was a broad consensus in Western societies on the future social, economic and political development trajectories.

All these factors lead to the conclusion that the next shift from centripetal trends in the Western world to centrifugal ones is only a matter of time, and this time might be measured in years rather than in decades. A shift could be triggered by the victory of another Donald Trump in the US presidential election in 2024 or by the coming to power in one of the major European countries of a right-wing populist like Marine Le Pen. The impulse for another strategic undocking may be the US-Chinese conflict over Taiwan or a sharp aggravation of the Israeli-Palestinian problem. There may be new differences in the Western camp on specific global commons, on the future of the UN, on assistance programs for developing nations, etc. The change of trends may take place in the second half or in the end of this decade, which will create additional opportunities for the foreign policy of non-Western countries, including Russia.

## Options for the Rest

With all the uncertainties in the possible developments within the Western world, it seems obvious that the change of centripetal trends to centrifugal ones will not occur in the very near future. So far, the process of the Western consolidation is only gaining momentum, spreading to new directions of foreign policy and affecting new dimensions of international life. This means that Moscow, Beijing and other centers of the non-Western world need to prepare themselves for a long-term interaction with the cohesive West, which has sufficient capabilities and enough political will to prevent or at least to mitigate manifestations of dissenting behavior within its ranks. This new reality poses serious challenges to all countries that are not ready to accept the West-generated rules of the game and to perceive international relations through the Western prism of asymmetric interaction between the global “core” and the global “periphery”.

If Moscow is not ready to return to its international standing of the early 1990s, then one of the fundamental tasks of its foreign policy should be to deal with a much more committed and focused opponent than ever before since the end of the Cold War. In all likelihood, next couple of years will be the most difficult time for Russia in its entire post-Soviet history, since these years will be the peak of political, economic and military pressure on Moscow from the most cohesive West.

The success or failure of Russia’s strategy depends crucially on Moscow’s ability or inability to effectively mobilize domestic resources and find a productive model of social and economic development in the face of a rupture of long-term trade, investment, technological, scientific and other ties with Western partners. In foreign policy, the main task is to consolidate Russia’s political, economic, military-strategic, humanitarian and other positions in the non-Western world, without abandoning the option of resuming a dialogue with the West. To expand Russia’s presence in the Global South, the Kremlin will have to thoroughly work on its foreign policy tools, which at the moment do not fully meet expectations and priorities of potential partners.

It should also be borne in mind that for many states of the Global South, Moscow’s bid for a leading role in the “non-Western world” does not look very convincing. Very often, Russia is perceived as part of the West, albeit a rather specific one. The current conflict in and around Ukraine has been interpreted by many in the Global South as a conflict within the “Greater West” (within the “white civilization”), while the South allegedly has to pay the price for the “Western” problem. Therefore, in relations with partners in the East and in the South, Russia should avoid using ambitious, but shallow ideological schemes and black-and-white political clichés to the extent possible. In particular, attempts to position such multilateral initiatives as SCO or BRICS as “anti-Western” projects, and the label the concept of the “Indo-Pacific” as a purely American construction, directed not only against China, but also against Russia, seem unjustified. Cooperation with the East and the South should proceed mainly in the format of specific, purely applied, incremental projects.



The consolidation of the West also assumes that any, even the most limited agreements on the “Western front”, Moscow will have to somehow coordinate with Washington, only very carefully probing the readiness of the European allies of the United States to demonstrate a minimal autonomy in their Russian policies, as it was the case during the “unipolar moment” a quarter of century ago. Attempts to play on the contradictions between the United States and the European Union over next couple of years are likely to be counterproductive.

Attempts to completely self-isolate from the West or the inclination to look at any Russia’s interaction with the West as an inevitable “zero-sum game” also seem counterproductive. The growing pressure of common problems—from non-proliferation of nuclear weapons to climate change—will one way or another push the parties to coordinate their postures and even to collaborate in limited areas, where that may be mutually beneficial. Apparently, such collaboration in the short term will be situational and will not change the overall negative background of these relations, but in the future, one can count on a gradual expansion of the range of areas in which it is possible to restore positive interaction.

The task of engaging with Washington is complicated by the continuing weakness of the Biden Administration, which is likely to become even more explicit in the event of an unfavorable outcome of the midterm congressional elections in November 2022 for the Democratic Party. The current political split in American society, the overcoming of which in the near future seems unlikely, not only creates restrictions for the consolidation of the West around the United States, but also turns the United States into an inconsistent and not always predictable actor in the international arena. Nevertheless, in many important dimensions of world politics and global economy, the United States remains an indispensable player, and therefore the restoration of a limited dialogue with Washington is not only desirable, but even vital for Moscow.

It is also very important for Moscow to avoid the temptation to build its foreign policy on the basis of the principle “who is not with us, is against us.” Given the emerging balance of powers in the world, attempts to form broad strategic anti-Western alliances and blocks are not likely to prove fruitful. More promising is the emphasis on the formation of situational coalitions around specific tasks, the solution of which is of interest to the widest possible range of potential participants. Only after a long time can stable alliances grow from some situational coalitions. In other words, strategic patience should become one of the inherent features of Russian foreign policy.

All of the above, of course, in no way negates the need for systematic and consistent work to form a new, inclusive and democratic world order. After all, even the notions of the “West” and the “East”, the “North” and the “South”, for all their resilience, are historically transient. In the emerging global community, the dividing lines between various geographical parts of the planet will no longer play the decisive role in world politics as they did in the past. The current geographical separation of countries, cultures, peoples and societies will sooner or later be replaced by a new, truly global unity on the basis of more interconnectedness and higher interdependence.

## About the Author

Andrey Kortunov is Director-General of the Russian International Affairs Council since 2011.

He graduated from Moscow State Institute for International Relations and obtained a post-graduate degree of PhD in History from the Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies under the Academy of Sciences. His previous positions include those in the Institute, including as Director of U.S. Foreign Policy Branch and Deputy Director of the Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies. He taught International Relations in European and U.S. universities. He headed a number of Russian public organizations and foundations in the fields of tertiary education, social sciences and social development.

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# Russian International Affairs Council

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The Director General of RIAC is Andrey Kortunov, who was Deputy Director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies of Russian Academy of Sciences between 1995 and 1997.

## Notes

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