

A NEW WESTERN COHESION AND WORLD ORDER

Andrey Kortunov

THE recent decisions of Finland and Sweden to join NATO, together with a radical shift in Germany's view of its own military and political role in Europe, have become the most graphic illustrations of the West's emerging cohesion. However, there has is plenty of other evidence of this newfound unity since February 24th, 2022. Examples include a quick agreement on harsh sanctions against the Russian Federation, swiftly approved plans to send military and economic aid to Ukraine, and a well-coordinated offensive against Moscow in major international organizations, to name just a few.

The question that arises here is whether this cohesion is purely situational or is likely to take more strategic contours. The answer to that

question will determine whether this emerging trend will survive and become stronger beyond the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It will be particularly crucial to see whether the West's emerging cohesion will define the future relations of its component national parts with China—the West's main strategic opponent.

To some extent, the sustainability of this cohesion already depends on when and how the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will end. Many Western politicians and analysts approach the standoff between Moscow and Kiev not as another regional crisis, but an existential conflict between democracies and autocracies. Its resolution, the thinking goes, will pave the way for the subsequent evolution of the international system.

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Photo: Guliver Image

On a quest to restore (the old) order: an American destroyer in the South China Sea

Should the conflict be resolved on Western terms—i.e., forcing the Kremlin to retreat without achieving its goals—such an outcome will undoubtedly form the foundation to preserve the West's cohesion for a long time. A “Western victory” could be a significant factor in legitimizing American leadership, thus breathing new life into the Western-led multilateral institutions that ensure foreign and defense policy coordination.

On the other hand, should Moscow emerge victorious, one could easily foresee a heated debate in the West about “who lost Ukraine.” New politi-

cal frictions and divisions would likely accompany the debate, both within and between Western states. Moscow's victory will equal a foreign policy defeat for the United States and create serious problems for the Biden administration, and even its successors.

Russia's special military operation has become a powerful catalyst of centripetal trends. However, it cannot be considered to be the main, let alone the only, source of the West's emerging consolidation. This movement was marked long before February 24th, 2022. Thinking back to 2021 and events like the launch of AUKUS—a new military-

political alliance to include the United States, the UK, and Australia—lifting the Australian-Indian-American-Japanese security dialogue (QUAD) to a higher institutional level; Washington’s grandiose “summit for democracy;” and the intensification of efforts to consolidate the traditional formats of interaction between the leading Western powers, such as NATO, EU, and G7 summits. It becomes clear that most of these initiatives were not limited to the sole purpose of deterring the Kremlin.

What seems like a period of consolidation may last for at least the next few years. Perhaps even longer—if the circumstances are right. Meanwhile, the ongoing consolidation remains temporary, and it will be inevitably followed by another rise of intra-Western contradictions and decreased unity. The question of when current trends might be expected to lose steam remains open.

CENTRIFUGAL AND CENTRIPETAL CYCLES

The first post-war “disintegration” cycle can be attributed to the early 1970s, when the United States suffered a military defeat in Vietnam, abandoned the gold standard, began to limit American commitments abroad as part of the Nixon Doctrine, and then found itself

in a deep domestic political crisis (i.e., the Watergate scandal). Conversely, this was also a period of economic boom in Japan and the expansion of the European Economic Community (EEC). In the early 1970s, the UK, Denmark, and Ireland joined the EEC, and negotiations later began on the accession of Greece, Portugal, and Spain against the backdrop of internal political changes in these countries. The interests of the three main centers of Western power began to diverge more clearly on many important issues, raising doubts about the sustainability of both American leadership and Western unity.

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To counter the emergence of centrifugal trends, Western leaders attempted to introduce elements of multilateralism into their interaction. The Trilateral Commission was established, followed by the Group of Six (G6), which quickly became the Group of Seven (G7). American President Ronald Reagan’s ascendancy to power allowed the United States to get out of the protracted crises of the 1970s, unite American society, and strengthen American leadership. The accelerating decline of the Soviet Union, and the resulting collapse of the socialist system in 1989, only contributed to restoring the West’s cohesion.

The next “disintegration” cycle started about two decades ago with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. This split the West, pitting the English-speaking coalition against much of continental Europe—most notably France and Germany. Although the split never led to a long-term confrontation between allies, it clearly outlined the limits of the “unipolar world.”

Centrifugal tendencies intensified during the Obama administration, which for the first time publicly shifted away from the Atlantic and toward the Asia-Pacific region. This, in turn, provided America’s European partners with an opportunity to play more active roles in two theaters: on the West’s “Eastern flank,” namely the former Soviet republics, and its “Southern neighborhood,” namely the Middle East and North Africa.

The efficiency of such geographical power distribution remains a subject of debate among historians. Nevertheless, the cracks that appeared in the West during the Obama years (2009-2017), only widened with Donald Trump (2017-2021). Over the years, the divergence between the United States and

its allies on fundamental issues like the green energy transition, the Iranian nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian settlement, and economic assistance to the Global South became explicit. Trade and economic contradictions

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worsened, ultimately leading the United States and the EU to the brink of a trade war. In the security department, the Trump administration tried to act as a provider of commercial services, for which it insisted on increased payments from multiple American “customers” around the globe.

Yet new “unifying” trends in the West have occurred over the last two years—at the very least. If one takes

the first months of 2020 as a starting point—when the COVID-19 pandemic awakened the most archaic reflexes of national egotism in the West, calling its common values into question—the progress made until the present day should be manifestly clear. The West has been able to draw appropriate lessons from its past difficulties, mobilize quickly and relatively successfully, prevent new offensives of right- and left-wing populists, and put aside many of the squabbles of recent decades. This has allowed

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An important role in the ongoing consolidation was played by of U.S. President Joe Biden. During the election campaign, Biden spoke a lot about the task of “reuniting the West” as one of his main priorities. He also invariably promised that the new American leadership would take into account the positions, interests, and priorities of American allies, favoring multilateral formats of engagement with its partners.

The Biden administration has not always and consistently lived up to this promise. American-style multilateralism remained very specific, even after the departure of Donald Trump. For example, the decision to hastily withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021 was seemingly made without prior consultations with allies, which naturally caused discontent and even deaf grumbling among the latter. Building a united front against Beijing with European allies proved impossible in the short run, as evidenced by rare and somewhat ambiguous references to Beijing in the final communiqué of the June 2021 NATO summit in Brussels. Until February 2022, there were serious differences between Washington and Berlin on the prospects for energy cooperation with Moscow as well. Finally, there is no complete consensus between the United States and

the “European troika” (the UK, France, and Germany) on restoring the multilateral Iran nuclear deal.

However, these tactical failures did not lead to deep new splits within the West. The new attitude of the White House coincided with the expectations of their European and East Asian allies, who for the most part did not approve of Trump’s foreign policy course. During the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign, they bet on Biden and unequivocally welcomed the “revival of American leadership.”

THE ROOTS OF CURRENT COHESION

Continued disunity of the West is a bearer of numerous risks. Western elites are aware of this, and the emerging cohesion is partly a result of this awareness. The divided West was steadily losing important economic, political, and geostrategic positions in the international system. Moreover, the West was increasingly losing its former status as a global role model. Western patterns of development were increasingly becoming associated with unresolved social and economic problems rather than past achievements. Politicians and experts began to speak of a “post-Western” world not only as a possibility, but as an omnipresent reality.

This trend towards the “demythologization” of the West was further articulated during the new coronavirus

pandemic. Nonetheless, it had started much earlier—i.e., with the inability of the West to cope with the fallout of the 2008 global economic crisis, find a convincing response to the challenges posed by the 2011 “Arab Spring,” and prevent the trends that led to the UK’s 2016 decision to leave the EU. When compared to the triumphant tides of the late 1990s and early 2000s, these failures appeared particularly painful. The self-preservation instinct called for consolidation, eventually pushing tactical differences and disagreements aside.

America’s European and Asian allies proved continuously unwilling to assume more responsibility for the state of the international system and the future of world order. The statements about the EU’s “strategic autonomy,” which for years kept coming from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, remained for the most part general declarations, especially with regard to security issues. Despite repeated statements on the urgent need for an alternative to American leadership, no such replacement was ever found in either Europe or Asia. Biden’s assumption of presidential duties was thus cheered by many in the

West as a return to the natural state of affairs, which had emerged only in the early Cold War period.

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February 2026, and then meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva in June 2021. Notably, no such bilateral summit took place between the U.S. and China. The White House seems to have planned to achieve some sort of stabilization of relations with Russia, reduce risks of U.S.-Russian confrontation, and focus on dealing with China as a more formidable strategic competitor.

It is unlikely that Washington could have counted on Moscow to abandon its strategic partnership with Beijing. Similarly, launching a new “reset” was off the table, but the task of minimizing the costs remained a priority. Overall, most American allies in Asia and Europe supported this prioritization, apart from a small number of Central

and Eastern European states that had traditionally tried to portray Moscow as the main threat to the West. In parallel with Washington's efforts throughout 2021, several attempts were made by the EU to find new areas of common interests with Russia. In particular, this was attempted in the field of "energy transition" and fifth-generation information technologies.

However, the attempt to fix relations with Moscow and focus on Beijing ended in failure. First, Moscow did not demonstrate a readiness to "fix relations" on American terms. Instead, the list of Russian demands to Washington continued to grow after the Geneva summit. At the end of 2021, Russia demanded a radical overhaul of the European security system that was twenty years in the making. This system relied on the central roles of the United States and NATO. Naturally, making concessions of this magnitude was unacceptable to both Washington and its European allies. Finally, Russian domestic trends signaled a further stray from liberal democracy, which in turn diminished any chances of rapprochement with the West.

Second, the Biden administration failed to quickly rally a coalition for

a long and uncompromising struggle against Beijing. This became evident in the restrained reactions of EU member states to the diplomatic conflict between Lithuania and China in the last months of 2021. While European countries gradually tightened their policy toward

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China—at some point even freezing the ratification of the 2020 comprehensive investment agreement that Brussels had successfully negotiated with Beijing during the German presidency of the Council of the EU—the continent continued to lag behind the United States in its confrontation measures against Beijing.

Accordingly, it was necessary to revise the tactics of Western consolidation, which required strong shocks. The coronavirus pandemic and the economic turmoil it caused did not come as such a shock, nor did the calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Moscow's special military operation on February 24th, 2022, thus came as a long-anticipated, invaluable gift for Washington. It allowed American strategists to take away the role of the world's villain from China and hand it to Russia. Russia's special operation has provided an opportunity to the West to re-focus on immediate areas of

common interest. Furthermore, it has also shed light on what institutional formats should be prioritized in pursuing Western cohesion.

While a prospective "pacification" of Moscow cannot remove the subsequent task of "taming" Beijing from the agenda, it serves as an important step towards approaching the larger problem. Moreover, the Russian special operation forced many wavering Western countries to take a fresh look at both Moscow and Beijing. Persistent attempts by the Chinese leadership to stay away from the unfolding conflict are unlikely to prevent the further consolidation of the West in confronting China in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

MANIFESTATIONS OF UNITY

As expected, Western consolidation began with the strengthening of security. This trend is taking place within a revived NATO and in the context of other multilateral and bilateral formats between the United States and its partners. NATO member states' total military budgets already account for more than half of global defense spending, with this share likely to grow even further in the near future. The lessons of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

are carefully studied, including the performance of the Western weapons supplied to Ukraine. These assessments are expected to have an impact on military modernization plans in the West.

The main focus seems to be on maintaining the West's critical technological advantages coupled with the further expansion of U.S.-led security alliances. The trend towards the "globalization" of NATO is only likely to gain speed—the bloc will increase its military presence both in the Arctic region as well as in the Indian and Pacific oceans. There is a clear trend towards greater coordination among allies in Europe and Asia, and there is every reason to believe that Washington will actively encourage further transcontinental coordination.

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Of course, not all European members of NATO are ready to fully support the United States in the upcoming confrontation with China. For instance, Germany is likely to confine itself to a merely symbolic military presence in the Pacific. But a sharp increase in German military spending—aimed at containing Russia—will pave the way for a corresponding redistribution of roles in NATO. This will allow other countries—especially the UK and

France—to strengthen their support for the United States in regions far beyond Europe. How exactly this will occur remains unclear. Nevertheless, the mechanisms for achieving such goals will be vigorously tested in the time ahead.

The United States will be the principal beneficiary of unifying trends. America’s dominant position in global arms-trade markets will be significantly strengthened, and any ideas of a European “strategic autonomy” from NATO will have to wait for better times. The information warfare against Russia—which entered a new phase on February 24th, 2022—has a goal to discredit Russian weapons as “obsolete” and “ineffective.” This, in turn, should lead to a redistribution of world arms markets in favor of the American defense sector.

However, this is not just a fight against Russian or Chinese arms manufacturers. The ongoing consolidation will likely strengthen the American defense sector vis-à-vis their EU competitors. In theory, the growth in EU military spending could lead to a consolidation of large European arms producers, increasing the competitiveness of EU exporters in global markets. In practice, this does

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not look very likely. Strengthening the positions of the EU defense complex in global markets is hardly possible without the actualization of the bloc’s “strategic autonomy” from the United States. The security consolidation of the West will be done on American terms and mainly in American interests. Under existing conditions, Germany is the only European state with realistic opportunities to increase weapons exports. Yet, Berlin too faces constraints when it comes to the most modern and expensive systems.

The American foreign policy position vis-à-vis its partners will also get stronger. While the Russian-Ukrainian conflict strengthened EU unity, this is unlikely to turn the EU into a truly global player. In fact, it seems more likely that Brussels will fixate itself on a predominantly regional agenda without attempts to pursue its own strategy in the South or East Asia. The EU may well get more active in Africa or the Middle East, but only because both regions might remain on the periphery of American interests.

In the economic domain, one can foresee vigorous efforts to resolve existing trade and financial contradictions within the West—between America and the EU,

but also with Washington’s main trading partners in East Asia. The Biden administration has already demonstrated more flexibility and willingness to compromise than Trump. For example, in October 2021, the United States lifted parts of the import tariffs imposed by the Trump administration on EU steel and aluminum. One can assume that the long-awaited synchronization of export controls towards third countries (primarily China and Russia) will soon start to materialize.

Priorities in Western cooperation will increasingly include strategic research and development. New multilateral consortia are going to emerge in key areas of ICT, AI, space and biotechnologies, green energy, and other fields. Most of these consortia will be led by American corporations, aided perhaps by European and East Asian partners where necessary. One of the most important goals of cooperation in research and development will be to preserve the West’s leadership in determining the technical standards of Industry 4.0. On new technological chains, prioritizing national security and minimizing political risk will come before economic feasibility and commercial efficiency. Deep inte-

gration between Western and Chinese high-tech corporations will become even more unlikely—even in the absence of a Sino-American trade war.

This cohesive and confident West will undoubtedly aspire to maintain unity on key aspects of global development. This applies to issues such as climate change, energy transition, internet governance, global digitalization standards, food security, pandemic prevention, cross-border migrations, gender and racial equality, protection of minority rights, and social and economic discrepancies within and between countries.

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Determining the future development agenda is becoming one of the key parameters for restoring Western moral leadership in global politics. It is possible that the EU—rather than the United States—will take the lead on many issues of global development. Still, without American support, promoting these issues to the international community will be difficult.

In any case, Western elites will try to sell their agenda to the rest of the world with renewed vigor. The concept of a “rules-based liberal international

order” will be further elaborated. However, it will continue to imply the West’s commanding role in developing the principles and norms for the behavior of states in particular spheres. These norms will then gradually be expanded to other actors. Those unprepared to follow the “rules of conduct” will be pushed to the periphery of the international system. The West will likely operate on the assumption that America’s geopolitical opponents will remain unable to offer comprehensive alternatives to the “rules-based liberal international order,” which will ultimately force them to adapt to Western standards.

Any Western consolidation can hardly do without attempts to push the boundaries of this world beyond the “historical West.” The main battleground is likely to remain in East Asia, where the United States faces pressure from China. 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 (i.e., the Middle East, Southeast Asia, North Africa, and the Caribbean) to the West.

There may be attempts to recruit new members to multilateral structures such as AUKUS, the Five Eyes, and the Quad.

While striving to weaken Russia and isolate China, the West inevitably faces a contradiction between its proclaimed ideological purity and the need for political expediency. This contradiction is particularly explicit in the 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 pushback from its partners in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and North Africa. This contradiction, as has happened many times in the past, will most often be resolved in favor of political expediency—although a complete rejection of liberal values as a foundation of Western cohesion will not happen any time soon.

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For evident reasons, Western leaders will draw the main dividing line between “responsible” and “irresponsible” actors on the world stage—and not between democracies and autocracies. This may even be used in attempts to reach tactical compromises with China and obstruct the deepening of Beijing’s partnership with Moscow. Geopolitical opponents of the West—from Russia and Iran to North Korea and Nicaragua—will be situationally included in the category of “irresponsible” players. The 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 in sequence—as opposed to in parallel—thus expanding the Western geopolitical space and narrowing its opponents’ room for maneuver.

IMPACT ON THE WORLD ORDER

Should Western cohesion prove sustainable over the coming years, it will have significant consequences for the system of international relations. The rallying of allies around the United States might postpone the prospect of a “mature” multipolarity for the foreseeable future. While multipolarity implies a relative equidistance of independent global power centers from each other—and the comparability of their military,

economic, technological, and other potentials—Western consolidation would again result in the creation of a “supercenter.”

Multipolarity also implies flexibility of geopolitical alliances and coalitions. Should there be excessive strengthening of one of the poles, the others will group themselves in such a way as to prevent

the domination of a single hegemon. The quest for this emerging consolidation does not imply such flexibility within the West. It is hard to imagine the EU uniting with Russia to counter the United States, or Washington joining forces with Beijing to limit the activity of Brussels.

While references to multipolarity will continue to be an important part of Western political rhetoric, the efforts of the Biden administration and its allies will be aimed at recreating a model based on an asymmetric interaction between the ‘global core’ (the West) with the ‘global periphery’ (the rest). This model envisions a gradual expansion of the core at the expense of the periphery.

It is often assumed that a binary division of the international system to the ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ will not necessarily lead to a bipolar world in

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the classic sense. On the contrary, large countries of the “non-West” will have to compete with each other for better terms of admission into the ‘global core.’ The potential rallying of the “non-West”

around China or Russia is clearly not a matter of immediate future.

Besides, the consolidated West retains many diverse opportunities to effectively counteract this process. Following in the footsteps of this logic, associations of those outside the ‘global core’—like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, or the Eurasian Economic Union—are based on common denominators of opportunistic interests of their participants, and therefore lack long-term strategic prospects. This means that even though these countries outnumber the West in population, natural resources, and even economic

potential, they will still be ill-equipped to compete effectively.

Optimistic forecasts of the aforementioned scenario envision a deepening of the economic, technological, political, and cultural dependencies of the global

‘periphery’ on the ‘core.’ If this were to materialize, globalization would be set to resume, making the crises of the early 2020s only a temporary suspension of trends. These forecasts entail

that the technological superiority of the West over the Global South allows the former to determine development parameters in key sectors of the latter—a critically important example of which is agriculture. The West’s soft power will be even more significant as the international system becomes more stable. And if preventing regional crises in the ‘periphery’ from escalating proves feasible, the international order will be relatively stable—at least over the mid-term.

The return of the “unipolar world” would not necessarily mean that the West should refuse any concessions to the Global South in the fields of economics, finance, sustainable development, and more broadly, in democratizing the international system. However, these concessions will not merely be a result of a growing pressure of the South, but instead a goodwill gesture of the West,

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designed to avoid destabilization in the ‘periphery.’ Therefore, the adjustments will be strictly measured and dependent on reciprocal commitments from the Global South. An increase in economic assistance to developing nations might be conditioned by their cooperation with the West. For instance, in restricting migration flows or making appropriate pledges on human rights.

Relations between the West and the Global South in this scenario would remain complex and sometimes prone to conflict. Yet, at the end of the day, it is the West that will remain the leading power in this bundle. The world ‘periphery’ in this logic does not have a fully-fledged interna-

tional subjectivity, and therefore needs elements of external governance by “mature” states and societies. Pushing Russia and then China to the margins of global politics will make it possible to restore Western monopolies over modernization, tying the global ‘periphery’ even more to the global ‘core.’

The gradual expansion of existing political and military blocs would likely continue. However, it seems more likely that the less formalized multilateral associations, like the Quad, would

become more instrumental in international security. The containment of China would remain the principal goal of these institutions, with their agendas becoming more inclusive over time, expanding perhaps to areas of ‘soft security’ and development.

The West might also try to rebalance the roles of some multilateral organizations. For instance, the G20 could be

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replaced by the G7 as the main platform for discussing the global economy. The latter may co-opt new members as necessary or invite individual countries of the Global South as observers on specific issues. Naturally, such a strategy could succeed only if the West presents the G7 as a global laboratory

that produces universal rules of the game based on the interests of the entire globe.

In order to get back to unipolarity, the West will have to manage the China challenge. The extent of the West’s willingness to compromise with Beijing remains unclear, and this will be determined by what the balance of power will look like. Still, it seems that the Western strategy will imply three goals: weakening Russia, isolating China, and preventing the onset of an

“Asian century.” 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 about the inevitable slow-down of the Chinese economy, rising domestic social tensions, and the unsustainability of the Chinese economic and social model. If time is against China, then the West has no interest in making long-term arrangements and compromises with Beijing.

The ongoing restructuring of the Chinese economy, social and demographic shifts, and China’s participation in globalization are believed to be leading toward the liberalization of the Chinese political system. As a result, the argument goes, China will be forced to play by Western rules and obey the logic of the resurrected ‘unipolar’ world.

If the West-China competition is a long-term game, then the main tactical task of the moment is to preserve Western cohesion when facing Beijing and, above all, prevent European allies from making their own deals with China. Accordingly, Washington should make maximum use of existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms

at its disposal to prevent any possible unsolicited-by-America “détente.”

In this renewed ‘unipolar’ environment, Russia would find itself relegated to the positions it held in the early 1990s. In fact, its position would be even more difficult, because Moscow would lose the trust it had enjoyed after the Cold War ended. The pressure on Russia

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would be stronger than in the 1990s, and potential rewards for “good behavior” modest and delayed. Nevertheless, sooner or later Russia would also be integrated into the West and used

by the latter as a significant additional resource in its confrontation with China.

Until this happens, the West would have its eyes set on maximal geopolitical, military, and economic weakening of Russia. This would include the consistent ousting of Moscow from regional and global multilateral organizations, the severing of economic and scientific ties, and placing pressure on countries that seek cooperation with Russia in any form. The main task of the West’s information offensive against Moscow would be to change the attitude of the Global South towards Russia.

At the same time, the West should be ready to maintain a minimum of contacts, primarily for the sake of keeping

strategic arms control and reducing risks of direct military confrontation. Beyond that, Western hopes would be pinned on the inevitability of leadership change in the Kremlin under growing internal and external pressure. Minimizing Moscow’s international political role should become an additional instrument of pressure on China, which will have to face the strengthened West on its own.

This, then, is a broad picture of a “desirable future,” as conceptualized by the West—vengeance for geopolitical retreats of the past two decades. Naturally, in political rhetoric, this picture looks somewhat different. Its fundamental elements appear in compliance with universal norms of international law, basic human rights, effective global governance, and inclusiveness. Nevertheless, this picture is based on an old idea to restore the unconditional leadership of the United States.

THE LIMITS OF CURRENT TRENDS

How realistic is a scenario that preserves and strengthens the cohesion of the West as a foundation of the international system? While it seems that Western consolidation has potential to continue, it also has its

limitations, which cast doubt about its long-term sustainability.

Although many intra-Western disputes have been put on the backburner since Biden took office in 2021, their deep roots remain intact. Sooner or later,

The current consolidation cycle is based more on the fear of a rising China and a resurgent Russia. Most Western leaders today do not have the same confidence in the triumph of liberal values, even within their own countries.

these roots may produce new sprouts. It is worth noting that the previous consolidation cycle of the end of the twentieth century had stronger foundations than the current cycle. At that time, liberal triumphalism, a deep belief in historical righteousness, and claims regarding the universal applicability of Western values all served as the

foundations of Western cohesion. The current consolidation cycle is based more on the fear of a rising China and a resurgent Russia. Most Western leaders today do not have the same confidence in the triumph of liberal values, even within their own countries. This casts doubt over the newly found cohesion of the West, making its endurance an uncertain prospect.

At present, several factors challenge the cohesion. First, the economic interests of the United States, the EU, and developed East Asia do not converge on everything. For example, disputes over American agricultural exports to

the European Union are unlikely to be resolved. The same applies to automobile exports from the EU to the United States. The U.S. dollar and the euro will continue to compete against each other in global financial markets—with the competition likely to intensify as other currencies begin to strengthen. In a more general sense, America's ability to indefinitely rely on external borrowing is questionable.

Then there is the feasibility of synchronizing political cycles among the Western countries. For instance, while the left-wing is currently on the offensive in Northern Europe, the upcoming November 2022 midterm elections in the United States might bring victory to the American right.

As opposed to disappearing over time, the differences between the Anglo-sphere and continental European models of social and economic development have become more significant. Repeated attempts by continental Europeans to borrow social and economic recipes from the U.S. and the UK have ended in failure. The changing ethnic and demographic pictures further add to issues in maintaining a common foreign and security policy.

Another obstacle pertains to political differences. It is one thing to unite situationally during an acute security crisis and against an economically insignificant opponent. Waging a long-term fight with an economic superpower like China is a whole other issue. There is no complete unity within the West on a strategy towards India, let alone on effective crisis management in the Middle East. It is hard to imagine how America and the EU will achieve complete unity on how to expand economic assistance to the Global South.

The ability of the West to isolate Russia over the long term is another questionable prospect. The world's reaction to Russia's special military operation has been mixed, and the sustainability of the anti-Russian consensus is far from certain. As the Ukraine crisis disappears from the headlines, Western cohesion will be increasingly difficult to maintain. Once the military phase of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation is over, disagreements on how to build future relations with Moscow will likely deepen.

Since the burden of anti-Russian sanctions is not evenly distributed between the United States and EU

As the Ukraine crisis disappears from the headlines, Western cohesion will be increasingly difficult to maintain. Once the military phase of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation is over, disagreements on how to build future relations with Moscow will likely deepen.

member states, disagreement is easy to predict. These trends will intensify if this conflict becomes a catalyst of a global economic crisis. Worse, it will sow greater discord should additional sacrifices by the West be required to prevent a Russian military victory.

Further differences between the United States and its allies on the optimal military posturing of the West cannot be ruled out either. While some American policymakers may consider a limited nuclear conflict between Russia and NATO acceptable, they are unlikely to find likeminded partners on the continent, where the probability of nuclear exchange would be the highest.

Even more challenging is the task of economically and technologically containing China. Attempts to isolate Beijing by severing economic and technological ties will lead to growing costs for the West itself. Beijing has been closely watching the West's decisions on sanctions against Russia, and it has begun to take preventive measures as a way to preempt the effects of such actions being taken against China. The crisis proved as an additional catalyst for Russian-Chinese cooperation in various fields, providing China with additional opportunities to counter the United

States. Most experts predict that as the noise of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict fades, China's political and economic support for Russia will likely increase.

American intentions to isolate China in the Indo-Pacific—where China remains

The concept of a “rules-based liberal international order” will continue to imply the West's commanding role in developing the principles and norms for the behavior of states in particular spheres.

the leading trading and investment partner for most economies—looks unrealistic. At the moment, Washington is not ready to fully open American markets to Asian states, and the U.S. also cannot challenge Beijing on large infrastructure projects in Asia. The United States has many

tariff, technological, and monetary benefits that it could offer its partners in the Indo-Pacific, but their provision remains constrained by the domestic weakness of the Biden administration. Moreover, Asians cannot count on continuity of American policy after the 2024 U.S. presidential election. All of this makes the West unable to offer a superior alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Cynical as it may sound, the Western public is getting used to unresolved military conflicts, especially when they do not reflect vital national interests. Events in Ukraine will be increasingly perceived as a regional problem, rather than a global challenge to the West. While this does not mean

that the Western public will become pro-Russian, the conflict in Ukraine as a tool of political mobilization has an expiration date.

The most dangerous challenge to the Western cohesion is internal. The United States in particular and the West in general face a number of fundamental economic, social, and political problems that have not been properly addressed. Western societies remain divided along many lines, and prospects for restoring internal unity remain dim. This, in turn, undermines the prospect of long-term and consistent foreign policy—fundamental to preserving the cohesion of the West.

The next shift from centripetal to centrifugal trends in the West is only a matter of time, which can be measured in years rather than decades. Trends may change in the second half or by the end of the 2020s, creating additional opportunities for non-Western powers, including Russia.

OPTIONS FOR THE REST

With all the present uncertainties, it seems obvious that a shift in trends will not occur in the immediate future. So far, Western consolidation has only been gaining momentum, spreading to new directions of foreign policy, and affecting new dimensions of life. This means that Moscow, Beijing, and other non-Western powerhouses need to pre-

pare themselves for a long-term interaction with a cohesive West that will remain capable of preventing, or at least mitigating, manifestations of dissent within its ranks. This new reality poses serious challenges to everyone unprepared to accept Western-generated rules of the game.

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 in the wake of the Cold War. The next couple of years will be the most difficult time for Russia in its post-Soviet history, marking the peak of political, economic, and military pressure on Moscow from a cohesive West.

The success of Russia's strategy now depends crucially on Moscow's ability to mobilize domestic resources and find a development model suited to survive a long-term rupture with the West. In foreign policy, the main task is to consolidate Russia's positions in the non-Western world, without abandoning the option to resume communication with the West. To expand its presence in the Global South, the Kremlin will have to thoroughly work on its foreign policy tools, which now fall short of expectations of potential partners.

For many in the Global South, Moscow's bid for a leading role in the non-Western world does not look very convincing.

Oftentimes, Russia is perceived as part of the West, albeit with its own specificities. The current conflict in and around Ukraine has been interpreted by many in the Global South as a conflict within the "greater West," with the South allegedly having to pay for a "Western" problem. In its relations with partners in the East and South, Russia should avoid using ambitious but shallow ideological schemes. In particular, attempts to present multilateral initiatives like SCO or BRICS as "anti-Western" projects or to declare the "Indo-Pacific" concept as a purely American construction

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seem unjustified. Cooperation with the East and South should proceed mainly in the format of specific, purely applied, incremental projects.

Given the consolidation of the West, Moscow will have to coordinate even the most limited of agreements on the "Western front" with Washington. Attempts to play on the contradictions between the United States and the EU will likely prove counterproductive.

Attempts to completely self-isolate from the West or to look at Russia's interaction with the West as an inevitable "zero-sum game" seem equally futile. The growing pressure of common prob-

lems—from non-proliferation of nuclear weapons to climate change—will push the parties to coordinate their positions and collaborate in limited, mutually beneficial areas. Short-term collaboration will not change the negative outlook of relations. In the future, however, gradually expanding the range of issues might help restore positive interaction.

The current political split in American society imposes constraints on Western consolidation around the United States; it also turns America into an unpredictable international actor. Nevertheless,

the United States remains an indispensable global player, making the restoration of limited dialogue vital for Moscow.

Russia should avoid the temptation to divide prospective partners by saying "you're either with us, or against us." Given the emerging balance of power in the world, attempts to form broad anti-Western alliances are unlikely to succeed. More promising is the emphasis on situational coalitions around specific tasks, the solutions to which are in everyone's interest. Stable alliances can grow from situational coalitions only after enough time has passed. In other words, strategic patience should become one of the inherent features of Russian foreign policy. ●