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Are the United States going to return to Eastern Europe, and what does this mean for Belarus?

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Summary

Recently, the Belarusian media has often cited the thesis that the United States is returning to the region of Eastern Europe. That is, they allegedly changed the line of the Barack Obama administration, which concentrated the attention of American foreign policy on the Asia-Pacific region and excluded Eastern Europe from the priority list.

Is the US going to come back?

The conclusion that the United States is returning to Eastern Europe is apparently being made not only in the context of the normalization of Belarusian-American relations that has intensified in recent months, but also taking into account the US National Security Strategy adopted in 2017, which called China and Russia the strategic competitors of Washington. And this, in theory, should imply a lot of US activity in all regions where, one way or another, their interests intersect with the two competitors, including Eastern Europe, especially after the Russian annexation of Crimea and against the background of the ongoing conflict in the Donbass.

However, in the National Security Strategy itself, Eastern Europe is mentioned only once and only as an example of successful US policy in the past (and these are the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have become members of NATO and the EU). But the document does not say anything about Washington's present and future priorities in the region. At the same time, the vision of the US strategy in Central and Eastern Europe, formulated by former Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Wess Mitchell in October 2018, really proceeds from the fact that "geopolitical competition is felt sharply " in the region and offers principles for US regional policy in such conditions.

But does this vision indicate Washington's truly massive return to the region? Or even more so about its readiness to conduct strategic competition in Eastern Europe according to the precepts of Mr. X (George Kennan) during the Cold War: "with unalterable counter-force at every point where [strategic competitors] show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world"?

Rather, a negative answer can be given to both questions. And despite this, there has been an increase in the participation of US troops and NATO forces in the region, the American missile defence systems in Poland and Romania, as well as Washington's military assistance to Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic countries.

Today, we are talking more about the process of understanding the possible role of Eastern Europe for the United States in the context of the strategic confrontation with China and, to a lesser extent, with Russia. At the same time, Washington does declare its readiness to step up diplomatically and economically for "competition for positive influence" and even for "aggressively promoting the national interest."

> However, in the medium- and long-term, Eastern Europe, apparently, will be a significant, but far from a priority region for the United States.

This means that Washington will try to be present here, but its behaviour will be primarily reactive, and not strategically programmed, as in the highest priority Asia-Pacific (Indo-Pacific) region.

Firstly, a purely arithmetic analysis of the potential of China and Russia leaves no doubt as to which of them is the main strategic competitor to the United States. And with whom, sooner or later, it will be important for Washington to find at least some common ground in order to balance the influence of its main strategic competitor (that is, China). Therefore, US activity in Eastern Europe will partly be aimed at creating in the future better negotiating positions in relations with Russia, and not at uncompromising confrontation with Moscow.

Secondly, in Eastern Europe, US competition with both China and Russia will be mediated and blurred by the multidirectional policies of European states and the entire EU (whatever form it may exist in the future). This, on the one hand, will create additional problems for Washington. Since it will be necessary to look for a complicated balance between one's own involvement in European affairs and the danger of being used by individual European states. For example, in the field of security, where some members of NATO and the EU traditionally rely on the military power of the United

States to protect their interests. On the other hand, this will make it possible for the United States to give up some regional issues to the European capitals and, accordingly, reduce its own presence.

Thirdly, the transformation of the international system that is taking place before our eyes is characterised by a decrease in the relative global power of the United States and China's ever closer approach to parity parameters. However, parity is still far, and can take a very long time to achieve, or it may not take place at all. But in such circumstances, the US will increasingly be forced to concentrate its attention, efforts and resources on key priorities. That is, in those regions where the price of losing one's own influence is higher and where it is better to threaten the vital interests of the main competitor. Otherwise, the United States will face the problem of overstretching, long described in the theory of international relations.

In this case, of course, the United States will be involved in competition and not in the highest priority regions. And the more active China is in Eastern Europe, the more important the region will look from Washington. This, by the way, applies to the entire European continent. The United States cannot ignore the fact that from 2008 to 2016, direct investment by China in the EU increased almost 50 times: from $840 million to $42 billion. This largely explains the passion about the participation of Chinese companies in the development of 5G networks in European countries. Moreover, here we are talking not only about purely geopolitical, but also technological competition, where the very close interaction of European companies with Chinese companies can give Beijing advantages that go beyond the traditional spheres of influence.

Moreover, in Eastern Europe, China's economic activity is manifested, first of all, not in the growth of direct investment, but in the development of infrastructure projects. Investment is still dominated by Russia. How much this alignment is perceived in Washington as a real threat to US geopolitical interests is a big question. Today, it’s hard to judge. It is significant that shortly, after the recent East European and Central Asian tour by Michael Pompeo, the Department of State announced the US Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025, which came out with the slogan “Strengthening Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity.” The same slogans are used in relation to the countries of Eastern Europe, however, the prospects for their practical implementation are much less understood than in Central Asia.

What does this mean for Belarus?

The process of the transformation of the international relations system opens up new opportunities for Minsk. Eastern Europe will increasingly be characterized by the presence of several key actors of different geopolitical calibre, between whom there are many mutual contradictions and simultaneously overlapping interests. The prospects for Belarus in the looming geopolitical layouts will depend, among other things, on the ability to quickly navigate the changes that are taking place and to not overestimate the significance of individual events and processes. Such as, for example, improving bilateral relations with Washington. However, underestimating this process would also be wrong.

> With the further normalisation of the interaction between Minsk and Washington, the United States appears to be acquiring a fundamentally new type of relationship in the region. Before, there were actually two relationships: relations with Russia and relations with states that perceive Russia as the main threat to their own security. Belarus represents a kind of a third type.

She is simultaneously interested in a significant diversification of her dependence on Russia and in maintaining the closest possible relations with Moscow.

Moreover, it is in the interests of Minsk to reduce the regional degree of geopolitical tension between the United States and Russia, since with a hypothetical transition of tension into the "red zone" means Belarus is likely to be the first victim.

Understanding this is associated with numerous peaceful and unifying initiatives that Minsk has been actively putting forward in recent years. The same (that is, their own vital interest) determines the stabilising potential of Belarus in regional security. And with the further adaptation of the United States in the region, this potential may become more popular both in Washington and in some other capitals. For example, this is precisely what the fast and constructive American reaction to the criticism from Minsk regarding the deployment of the US military contingent near the Belarusian border, who arrived in Lithuania at the NATO Defender Europe 2020 exercises, indicates.

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