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The dangers of sanctions race between the USA and Russia

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Summary

Summer of 2018 has become an uncommon summit-and-sanction-packed period for the Russian-American relations. While experts and journalists continue processing all the new details of the Helsinki summit held a month ago, regular sanctions are being reported from Washington. Both those already approved and expected.

A group of senators submitted to Congress a bill called the 2018 Defending American Security from Kremlin Aggression Act, which summarizes the existing sanctions and proposes new ones. And the executive branch of the American government again turned to "Skripal case". A recap: in March this year Skripal father and daughter were allegedly poisoned with the chemical called “Novice”. Almost immediately after that, the United States, along with a number of European states, imposed sanctions on Russia, which, in their opinion, is behind the incident. Now Washington decided to revisit this issue, since Russia "used chemical and biological weapons in violation of international law against their own fellow citizens."

As a result, the administration of Trump announced the introduction of actually two sets of sanctions. The first one should come into force on August 22 and will concern a ban on the export to Russia of a number of goods: electronic devices, sensors and lasers, oil and gas production equipment, as well as information technology.

The second one may become a reality three months later, if Russia does not convince the United States that it does not violate its obligations in the field of non-use of chemical and biological weapons. In this case, Washington declares readiness to even downgrade the level of diplomatic relations and resort to severe restrictions on import-export operations. The representative of the Department of State suggested, that this may mean losses of several hundred million dollars. According to him, the sanctions may imply a "ban on loans from any American bank."

Sanctions ≠strategy

When sanctions and counter sanctions are announced with increasing regularity, the motivational part of a particular decision becomes less relevant for analysis. Of key importance is where the trend leads and what intended and unintended consequences it may have.

It is clear that new US sanctions are not conducive to progress on even the modest agreements, reached at the Helsinki summit. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev called the decisions of the Department of State "full-fledged economic war." The more often the word “war” (economic or any other) will sound in the official Russian lexicon, the more this word will put pressure on the Kremlin itself: even if it hurts itself, Russia will have to invent surprises in the form of retaliatory measures. Any escalation spiral in bilateral relations between the United States and Russia will obviously aggravate many problems of global significance.

Behind these fairly obvious conclusions is a less discussed, but even more serious problem: the lack of any strategic approach in US policy towards Russia (and, probably, not only Russia). Sanctions cannot be the main instrument of foreign policy, and even more so they cannot be a foreign policy strategy.

> If sanctions are not an integral part of a full-fledged foreign policy strategy, but are used reactionary, then they only create chaos and inevitably lead to various kinds of unintended consequences.

The decision to introduce new sanctions in the framework of the Skripal case looks particularly non-strategic from the point of view of US foreign policy. The Department of State announced it at the time when Senator Rand Paul was in Moscow, who handed a letter from Trump to the Kremlin. According to the senator himself, this letter “emphasizes the importance of further cooperation in various fields, including in the fight against terrorism, deepening the dialogue in the legislative sphere and the resumption of cultural exchanges”.

Chaotic sanctions look strange from the standpoint of the key theses of the US National Defense Strategy, adopted in January of this year. In particular, it defines long-term rivalry with Russia and China as the main priority for the US Department of Defense. And if we proceed from the argument of the growing conflict in relations between the great powers, then a full-fledged strategy, which is not only written on paper (in the form of doctrines and concepts), but also really guides daily decisions, is absolutely

critical. Without it, in the conditions of a multitude of unknown variables at the level of international relations system, not only the global leadership of the United States, but also the elementary security of American citizens, becomes especially compromised.

Not to mention the fact that the sanctions race exacerbates the traditional problem of perception in international relations, which is described in the classic work of Robert Jervis "Perception and misperception in international politics". Today, this problem is especially relevant for Washington's relations not only with Russia. In varying degrees, it is represented on almost all key vectors of American foreign policy: in relations with the EU, Mexico and Canada, China, and the countries of the Middle East.

A traditional and proven means to minimize the risks of misunderstanding or misperception of the motives and intentions of a partner/opponent/competitor/adversary is diplomacy. But there is another serious problem: the course of events in Russian-American relations and the various factors affecting them significantly reduce the ability of diplomats to do their work.

> Negotiation channels are as good as tied up, especially after radical thinning out of the diplomatic corps. Even on obviously mutually beneficial topics. And each new sanction decision reduces diplomatic opportunities even more.

Explosive lack of strategic vision

At the same time, it is obvious that the sanctions race unfolds, first of all, not between Washington and Moscow, but between the White House and Congress: who will prove his greater rigidity and determination. And this is the result of the internal political considerations of the Republican administration, which seeks to prevent democrats from scoring political points using the Russian theme.

But there is an important nuance.

> The current situation most likely indicates that the United States do not feel the real danger coming from Russia.

Despite the fact that during the polls more than half of Americans call the Russian influence a threat to their well-being. But even the argument about US strategic vulnerability in the event of an escalated conflict with Russia seems not to be taken seriously by the Americans, but rather very hypothetically. That is, everyone

understands that Russia has a nuclear arsenal for the destruction of the United States, but no one feels its breath on their backs like during the Cold War. Otherwise, the actions of Washington would not be as chaotic as they are today.

This state of affairs is probably the result of a quarter-century experience of the US as the only superpower in the era of the "end of history." Also, this objective perception of Russia is also facilitated by an objective statistical reality: the ratio of GDP and military budgets, demography, and the R&D performance of the countries. This creates a kind of subconscious feeling that the issue with Russia is unimportant — that is will "self-resolve" in the future.

And this is another ill-understood danger of lack of strategic vision. Russia understands well the current balance of its own and western capacity. And they understand that the ongoing transformation of the system of international relations is far more fateful for it than for the United States. For Russia, it is a matter of survival. And this means that it has no other alternatives left except to act more and more decisively and risky as the waves of sanctions get bigger.

Eastern Europe and Belarus

Russia will have to act in different directions: both familiar and new ones. Even greater stress will be felt in other parts of the planet. But especially - in Eastern Europe. In any case, this region has been and remains the eye of a physical and conceptual storm. This is where most of the geopolitical contradictions between Russia and the West are concentrated. Therefore, further chaotic escalation of tension in the absence of strategic understanding means even greater uncertainty for the region and almost guaranteed overheating. The situation is aggravated by the fact that for Washington, Eastern Europe is still not a priority and is perceived rather remotely. And especially for President Trump: suffice to recall his statements during the election campaign that Germany should deal with the problems of Ukraine.

As the year and a half of Trump's presidency showed, such low-priority nature of the region leads not to "big deals" with Russia, which many Western and Eastern European countries feared, but to a haphazard approach to bilateral and multilateral issues. That is, the general chaos in the US policy towards Russia in Eastern Europe may be amplified by an even greater number of decisions that are not included in the strategic vision (which is missing altogether).

> A new wave of sanctions is expectedly challenging even more the scanty hopes for regional stabilization appearing after the July summit in Helsinki.

As already noted, it all poses greatest danger in Eastern Europe precisely for Belarus. In case of any developments under conditions of further escalation of geopolitical tensions, Belarus will face increased risks for its own security. For this reason, Minsk is the main stakeholder in the normalization of the regional situation. However, for obvious reasons, Belarus has a very limited set of tools to influence this situation. The possibilities of Minsk depend mainly on the general geopolitical layout. And the more strategic certainty there is in these layouts, the more likely Belarus will be able to avoid the worst scenarios for itself. Obviously, sanction races cannot lead to strategic certainty.

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