Commentary
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The Post-Soviet Space and New Multi-Polarity

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Summary

Recent visits by US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo to Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan have caused clear concern in Moscow. If Washington's contacts at this level with Kiev have long been daily drudgery, then, for example, in Belarusian-American relations, this is the highest-level visit in 26 years. And the result of Pompeo's negotiations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan may be the activation of the 5+1 format as a key factor in Central Asian geopolitics.

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Of course, the steady high degree of tension between Russia and the United States in recent years has added intrigue to Washington's diplomacy in the region. Indeed, the former Soviet countries, for objective reasons, will always be of key importance from the standpoint of Russian security interests.

The dynamics of US relations with a number of former Soviet states can be analysed within the framework of the current agenda, where Pompeo's tour has both external and internal political dimensions. However, it is more interesting and practical to look at it from a strategic point of view.

> In the past several years, the system of international relations which emerged following the end of the Cold War has been undergoing a radical transformation. It is not entirely clear when this process will end or exactly how the new system will look.

But the general outlines of the future system seem to already be visible.

The basic backbone will be the competition between the US and China. However, in different regions of the world, it will manifest itself in different ways, since in many regions this bipolar confrontation will be diluted by the interests and potential of

regional powers. In fact, this will reflect the very multi-polarity that Russia has been actively seeking for the last decade. But in the end, the new multi-polarity will not divide the whole world into "zones of privileged interests", but create numerous regions of increased diplomatic, economic and informational competition.

With a high degree of certainty, we can predict that Eastern Europe and Central Asia will be among these regions. They are literally penetrated by both multiple contradictions and the compatible interests of key global and regional actors. Therefore, no power can establish an exclusive sphere of influence there. In these regions, the key actors will constantly have to compete for the best positions.

It seems that in its policy in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Washington is beginning to proceed more and more from these strategic expectations. We can read this in basic American documents, for example, in the 2017 US National Security Strategy. Moreover, Central Asia is obviously more important for Washington than Eastern Europe. The Americans are now not going to hide their interests. A good confirmation of this is the nature of Pompeo's visit to Minsk and his proposal to provide 100% of the oil Belarus uses at a competitive price.

However, it would be an exaggeration to consider this offer, or Pompeo's statements in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as "proposals of the century" and components of a clearly formulated grand American strategy.

> In the context of the world's transformation, the United States, despite its political and economic power, is forced, like all other states, to watch closely and adapt to changing conditions. Pompeo's post-Soviet space tour is an element of this work.

The post-Soviet republics themselves are even more attentive to the transformation of the system of international relations. They are small and, accordingly, vulnerable states, for which the current geopolitical turbulence carries much more serious risks than, for example, Russia. Therefore, they are interested in expanding and diversifying their political and economic opportunities.

They consider diversification not as a counterbalancing against Russia (although it may often look like this), but as a means of reducing existing and future risks. That is, their foreign policy is not about Russia or the United States, but about themselves. It is their desire to maximise their national interests in the context of growing competition from big actors.

Unfortunately, such actions among the post-Soviet republics, especially Belarus and Kazakhstan (that is, Russia's closest allies), inevitably lead to a trap of misunderstanding in relations with Moscow. When perceived inconsistencies exist, they, in turn, lead to mutual suspicions and false perceptions, among allies, of each other's actions. This is especially true when certain decisions made by the allies can worsen Russia's competitive position.

A natural question arises: what can be done about it?

To begin with, it is important to recognize that such a situation is inevitable in the face of growing geopolitical competition. The proverbial clock cannot be "turned back", and attempts to force the post-Soviet republics to impose some other model of behaviour will only lead to even more painful consequences for everyone, including Russia itself. Therefore, Moscow and the allies need to learn how to manage their relations in such a way, so as to minimize the negative consequences of these processes.

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