Commentary
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Turbulence-2024: A non-unique year of unique developments

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Summary

The current decade has been defined by monumental changes, and the year 2024 stands as a vivid yet typical reflection of this era. It will be remembered for many significant events, but it will not be considered truly unique; rather, it will be one of several years that future generations will extensively write about and analyse.

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The New Year's chimes have ushered 2024 into history, archiving its countless events. And there were indeed many—more than enough to fill several years, or even an entire decade, in more peaceful times. In what follows, I reflect on some key developments of the year in international affairs and attempt to distil them into several prominent trends.

International turbulence

The term "turbulence" is often used to describe periods marked by unpredictability and crises. It might seem that this is merely a metaphor borrowed from aerodynamics, abstractly emphasizing instability and an increased level of risk in global affairs. However, this is not entirely accurate. In 1990, the renowned American political scientist James Rosenau published a book titled *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity*. With it, "turbulence" became a political science concept. Interestingly, the 1990s, when the book was published, aligned less with this concept than the 2020s we are currently living through.

The idea of international turbulence suggests numerous factors that cause global politics to become unsettled. It is not only about the power struggles and balance between key states, which determine spheres of influence, shape the poles of the world system, and establish new rules for interaction. It also includes changes in technological paradigms, traditions, and practices. Additionally, social changes inevitably follow technological innovations. This concept can also encompass innovations in the realm of information and communication between people.

In all these and many other areas, we are witnessing, without exaggeration, historical transformations. Humanity has entered an epochal zone of turbulence, and it seems that we will remain in it for quite some time.

> In this regard, the year 2024 was particularly symbolic: hardly any of the already existing questions about the present and future of the world were fully answered during the year. Meanwhile, new questions and sources of uncertainty notably increased.

System moving away from unipolarity

One element of this complex and multifaceted process is the transformation of the international relations system. This refers to the redistribution of power and influence across our planet and the resulting changes in interstate communication and the organization of international life. The year 2024 did not introduce any radical innovations in this regard; it simply continued a trend that began quite some time ago.

The essence of this transformation lies in the shift from nearly three decades of unchallenged unipolarity, led by the United States, to a movement towards some form of multipolarity. However, its future contours remain unclear. In the context of growing turbulence and the strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China, the ultimate outcome will depend on many variables. At the same time, the year 2024 confirmed at least two important characteristics of this transformation, which must be considered together.

Firstly, the U.S. and the West, as a whole, continue to lose their potential for global dominance. This is happening due to both objective factors and subjective ones (such as mistakes made by Western politicians and officials). The changes are particularly evident at the level of perception, with non-Western states increasingly questioning Western influence, which can be just as important as the numerical indicators of power and influence. This is reflected in the fact that Washington’s demands are increasingly

insufficient to prevent developments it finds undesirable. For example, in 2024, this was evident in the Middle East, where U.S. calls and ultimatums were largely ignored by both allies and opponents. Similar instances occurred in other regions around the world.

Against this backdrop, the activity of other states and their unions is naturally on the rise. The past 366 days did not bring any breakthrough events in this regard (nor could they). Nevertheless, the long-term trend of building alternative institutions to the West, or those that adjust Western dominance, remains. The most obvious manifestations of this trend are the increasingly vocal influence of the so-called "Global South," growing interest in the BRICS and SCO formats, and attempts to reform the UN and the international financial system.

However, *secondly*, the shift away from unipolarity does not appear to be a straightforward process. This is true economically: for example, despite the trend of the West's diminishing power, the share of the U.S. in global GDP has risen to 26%, reaching its highest level in two decades. And it is even more true politically.

> The decline in the geopolitical weight and capabilities of the West does not automatically result in an explosive rise in the weight and capabilities of others. In other words, we are not facing a formula of "A-1 = B+1."

Geopolitical power and influence in the ongoing transformation of the global system are being redistributed more like butter on a slice of bread: unevenly, but more or less everywhere.

Most countries around the world are responding to these changes in a similarly nonlinear way. They are not trying to shift from Western influence to another sphere, nor are they seeking to exit close cooperation with the U.S. in favour of similarly tight engagement with China, Russia, or anyone else. Instead, they are aiming to expand and diversify their options. To put it differently, they do not wish to replace dependence on one power with analogous dependence on another. It is more rational for them to increase their resilience through diversification, moving away from single dependencies, and hedging against uncertainty.

Omnipresent proxy wars

The year 2024 continued long-developing trends, but the situation regarding war and peace became noticeably more tragic than in the previous year. Even though already in 2023, the UN noted that the number of armed conflicts worldwide was the highest since

World War II. And the Uppsala Conflict Data Program showed that a decade ago, the number of conflicts in active phases was nearly 70% lower than it was in 2023.

In 2024, the various wars and military conflicts around the world began to appear as part of one larger narrative. This was true both because of their sheer number and scale, which made evening news broadcasts seem like an endless account of bloodshed, and because of the emerging direct connections between what seemed like entirely different conflicts.

> These connections arose and solidified through the logic of proxy warfare: when external powers involved in a particular regional conflict not only focus on local specifics but also see opportunities to harm their geopolitical rivals and weaken their positions in other parts of the world.

This logic is clearly evident both in Ukraine and the Middle East. The most recent example from the last year is the collapse of Assad's regime in Syria. This would likely have been improbable without Moscow's full involvement in military actions against Ukraine and Iran's difficulties amid Israel's military campaigns against Hamas and Hezbollah. The potential for such pervasive proxy warfare is far from exhausted, and we can expect its further destructive expansion in 2025.

If we assume that the new Trump administration manages to achieve even minimal substantive progress on the Russia-Ukraine war, this European issue may at least play a slightly lesser role in the global proxy war puzzle. However, as the events of the outgoing year have confirmed, the Middle East will remain a constant—a region of the world that is the most unstable and volatile. By the end of 2024, the political map of the Middle East had been redrawn again, but tensions, unpredictability, and "murky geopolitical waters" remained constants in the region.

Unique year of unique elections

As has been frequently noted, the year 2024 was also unique due to an extraordinary confluence of electoral events. It saw the largest number of elections in history, with nearly one-third of the world's countries holding elections—some multiple times—accounting for more than 60% of the global population.

> The year demonstrated a significant rise in public discontent with mainstream politics and the methods of "doing politics" that have become familiar over the past few decades.

Almost everywhere, electoral results reflected an anti-mainstream trend, which either brought non-centrist opposition parties to power or showed a critical rise in their popularity. In some countries, political forces that had dominated governments for decades suffered crushing defeats. For example, in the UK, Japan, and South Africa. Across many places, including Europe, there was a clear political shift to the right, with extreme right-wing (and in some cases, far-left) groups—once considered unacceptable—firmly entering parliaments and even governments.

This trend, however, should not be overemphasized just yet. It is not yet a fully overturning trend that drastically shifts the political spectrum overnight. Nevertheless, it does reflect the growing crisis of centrist political ideologies, and in the coming year, this will remain one of the main challenges.

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