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War in Ukraine: Is Russia Challenging the US Global Dominance?

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Abstract: Russian leadership for decades has been skeptical of the US-centric world, considering it both a threat to Russia's sovereignty and the great power status. At the same time, the main goal of Russia appears to be less making Russia the new global leader and more creating a multipolar world with numerous power centers engaging in various alliances and conflicts. The war in Ukraine, due to the commitment of the Western nations and the US to support this country, is currently perceived in Moscow as a way to coming closer to this multipolar world. Whether this perception has changed under Donald Trump, is doubtful.

Keywords: Russia; war in Ukraine; US hegemony

JEL Classification: F51; F54

1 Introduction

In March 2014, Barak Obama, talking about Russia's actions in Ukraine (at that moment of time, Russia just annexed Crimea and threatened to move its troops into Eastern Ukraine), described Russia as a “regional power” and its aggression against Ukraine as a sign of weakness, and not of strength (Guardian 2014). This rhetoric describes Russia not as a country, which has the capacity to challenge the leading role of the US in the world – rather, as a declining power, which has no choice but to limit itself to attempts to establish dominance over its immediate neighbors. Since then, Russia's ambitions clearly increased in geographical scope – the involvement in the civil war in Syria and the covert actions in Africa are best examples for it. The full-scale war in Ukraine since 2022 is an event with global repercussions. Still, it is doubtful whether Russia's economic and military potential suffices to become a real challenge for the US – at the very least, its importance is clearly below that of China.

This paper, however, aims to address a different question – does Russia itself really intend to challenge the global leading role of the US? Should the war in Ukraine

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be seen as such a challenge? Obviously, our understanding of the logic of decisions made in the Kremlin due to opaque and intransparent nature of the Russian regime is very difficult; some of them are motivated by misperceptions and mistakes rather than by well-calculated strategy (Libman 2025a). Still, some tentative observations can be made.

In what follows, I proceed in four steps. First, I discuss the general attitude of Russia towards a US-centric world. Second, I look at which alternative Russian leadership would consider optimal or attractive. Third, I consider the role of the war in Ukraine in this context. And fourth, I briefly discuss how Russia's position could have changed in the last months, after the elections of Donald Trump.

2 Russian Anti-Americanism: The Quest for Sovereignty and Great Power Status

While in the early 1990s the general attitude of the Russian population and elites to the US was relatively positive, already towards the end of the decade, i.e. before Putin came to power, the situation changed: both the general public and the elites developed a significant mistrust towards the US and the US-centric world (Sokolov et al. 2018). This did not immediately manifest in the policy changes: the administration of Boris Yeltsin, in spite of substantial differences over the Kosovo crisis, maintained generally good relations with the US, and Vladimir Putin in the first years of his presidency even positioned his country as a global ally of the US (this was in particular visible during the War on Terror, with Russia allowing the US to use Russian territory to supply NATO troops in Afghanistan). Since mid-first decade of the 2000s, however (the Orange Revolution in Ukraine appears to be a particularly important yardstick), Russian leadership more or less openly considers the US as a strategic rival.

Russian anti-Americanism is linked to two core beliefs different factions of the Russian elites share: the primacy of Russia's sovereignty and treatment of Russia as a great power (Laruelle 2025). On the one hand, for Putin's regime, a fundamental objective is to ensure complete and undisputable sovereignty of Russia: this includes preventing any sort of intervention in Russia's domestic affairs, for whatever reasons. Putin, from the very beginning of his rule, openly describes the fear of territorial disintegration of Russia or dominance of foreign powers as his major concern, driven by his perception of the Russian history of the 1990s. From this point of view, US is seen as interventionist power, seeking for allies within the Russian society and potentially exercising influence on the Russian domestic politics (like it does in many other countries). On the other hand, the great power status of Russia is also

undisputable in the eyes of Putin and his elites. This great power status includes, in particular, the existence of privileged spheres of influence – in the Russian case, it would be the post-Soviet Eurasia. The US is seen as violating the boundaries of these spheres of influence and thus potentially threatening the great power status of Russia.

These two fears are based on a very specific vision of the US widespread among Russian elites and intellectuals, which Morozov (2002) refers to as “romantic realism”. Russian elites are extremely skeptical of any ideational or normative justifications of the foreign policy: for them, international politics is ultimately a quest for power and dominance. Thus, whenever the US in its support of democratic transition in some countries referred to any normative goals, from the Russian point of view, these claims were mere rhetoric: in reality, the US was always interested in extending its influence. This, by itself, is a position, which is shared not only by Russia (it is foundation of the realist approaches to international relations). What makes Russian realism “romantic” is that Russia assumes that the US power politics ultimately pursues a single goal: dismembering and weakening Russia. The motives for this clear-cut anti-Russian stance are not discussed – they are automatically implied as the ultimate goal of the US.

These perceptions of the Russian elites create fruitful ground for the emergence of all sorts of security dilemmas. Indeed, if the final goal of the US is weakening Russia than the final goal of Russia ought to be weakening the US. More specifically, disturbing the US policy worldwide becomes the goal of Russian policy in itself: rather than instrumentally trying to achieve any specific objectives (i.e. strengthen its power or extract rents), Russia simply focuses on opposing the US objectives. This “spoiler power” approach seems to play an important role at least for some foreign policy initiatives of Russia, although certainly not for all of them.

3 The Desired Future: A Multipolar World

While rejecting the US dominance, Russian leadership does not seem to attempt to replace it by a world where Russia plays the leading role. These goals, which could have been seen as realistic by the Soviet leadership, clearly are beyond the reach of the modern Russian Federation. In his public rhetoric Putin is very vocal in criticizing the imperial overstretch of the USSR – thus, according to Putin, the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia was a mistake, because it “contradicted the interests of other peoples” (Meduza 2023) (the irony of him making the statement in 2023, a year after unprovoked full-scale aggression against Ukraine, is evident). Rather than aspiring global dominance or a return to bipolarity, Russia declares its commitment to what it refers to as a multipolar world (Chebankova 2017).

In a nutshell, the idea of multipolarity assumes the coexistence of numerous power centers, each endowed with its own sphere of influence and which “sovereign” (in the sense used by the Russian leadership, i.e. being able to deter any foreign interventions in its domestic affairs). The US and the West are certainly seen as one of these power centers; at the same time, in a multipolar world, other power centers become important (e.g., China, India or Brazil); Russia sees itself as one of these multiple power centers. World politics is then determined by the interplay of these power centers, occasionally cooperating and occasionally in the state of conflict. The “sovereignty” of these power centers implies that their cooperation is always conditional: it can be revoked if national interests require it. This is, in fact, precisely the policy Russia pursues in relations with other countries it treats as possible power centers – the relations between Russia and Turkey in the last decades, for example, have been characterized by numerous periods of confrontation followed by new deals and partial cooperation.

This vision of a multipolar world therefore includes international conflicts as normal part of international affairs. It also implies that countries, which do not have enough resources and power potential to become independent poles, are likely to become part of spheres of influence of these poles. Essentially, precisely this vision is behind the, from the Russia’s point of view, optimal organization of relations with the US. From the point of view of the Russian leadership, the desired future of relations between Russia and the US would be based on a new ‘big deal’, which would delineate these spheres of influence and ensure Russia’s place among the great powers.

One can notice that the multipolar world in the Russia’s rhetoric reminds less of the world of the Cold War era and more of an older system of international relations – the concert of nations, which dominated Europe after the end of the Napoleonic wars. Occasional allusions to that era, when international relations were left to small elite groups, and most citizens did not interfere in the international political matters, are frequent in the speeches of Russian high-ranking officials (Libman 2025b).

4 The War in Ukraine

While it is clear today that the full-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022 constituted a fundamental shift in the structure of international relations and will have dramatic consequences for Russia for years (or even decades), it is not self-evident, whether Russian leadership prior to the war expected such outcomes. There are good reasons to argue that Russia expected a quick and decisive victory within weeks (Gel'man 2025). This victory, in turn, would have brought Ukraine in the Russia’s sphere of influence, and, from Moscow’s point of view, deter the attempts of the West – the US

and Europe – to encroach onto it. On the one hand, in Putin's eyes, the entire history of Ukraine of the last two decades was determined by the competition between the West and Russia, where West was gradually getting the upper hand (Putin does not seem to believe that any changes in Ukraine in the last decades were genuinely driven by the spontaneous self-organization of Ukrainian people or internal Ukrainian political processes – for him events like Euromaidan and the Orange Revolution are merely results of the Western covert operations). On the other hand, Putin seems to firmly believe – in spite of the obvious evidence to the contrary – that Ukrainian people really want to establish a closer alliance with Russia, and these are only Ukrainian elites, controlled by the puppeteers in Washington, in London and in Brussels, who prevent this and, even more, turn Ukraine into what Putin calls “anti-Russia”. His article ‘On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians’ published in 2021 provides a detailed summary of these ideas (Barabanov 2021), which, in spite of obviously being completely disconnected from reality, seem to have a decisive impact on the Russian foreign policy.

Thus, at least originally, from the point of view of the regime of Putin, the goal of the war in Ukraine was less to challenge the US dominance worldwide and more to ensure that the key element of the Russian sphere of influence remains within this sphere. At the same time, from the start, Russia placed the war in a broader context of its relations with the West. In December 2021, the Russian foreign ministry published two draft treaties Russia wanted to conclude with the US and the NATO, which would preclude further NATO expansion and ensure that NATO forces are not deployed in Eastern Europe (Radio Liberty 2021). Still, the war was likely seen as but one of many possible arenas for the Russian foreign policy and its complex relations with the West.

Over time, this ‘global’ aspect of the war in Ukraine became increasingly important from the point of view of the Russian leadership. Today, in the official propaganda and, most likely, in the worldview of Moscow elites, the war in Ukraine is perceived as a proxy war against the West, as part of a general confrontation between Russia and the EU/US. This interpretation is reflected even in the choice of labels for the war in the Russian propaganda. Officially, the war in Ukraine is referred to in Russia as a ‘special military operation’. At the same time, occasionally, Russian high-ranked officials also use the term ‘war’ – but they do it more often when they talk about the general conflict with the West and not about the military actions in Ukraine specifically (Libman et al. 2024).

In this global confrontation, in the Putin's regime eyes, Ukraine plays the decisive role: by showing that Russia can end this proxy war with a favorable outcome the regime in Moscow not only ensures the original goal (the weakening of ‘anti-Russian’ regime in Ukraine or even control over the country) but also demonstrates to the entire world the weakness of the West and of the US (a point, which plays a

crucial role in the Russian propaganda, see Ma et al. 2025). This also explains the absolute concentration of Russia on the war in Ukraine, even at the cost of other traditional parts of Russia's sphere of influence (like the Southern Caucasus). Defeat of the West in Ukraine, from the point of view of the Kremlin, offers a way to the world where the West abandons its ambition of hegemony and accepts the role of one of the multiple poles. To some extent, this reinterpretation of the war is driven by the extent to which the West declared its commitment to supporting Ukraine – every time a Western leader promises to stand with Ukraine until the end, from the Russian point of view, it makes breaking this promise (which would happen in case Russia ends the war with a favorable outcome) increasingly problematic for the credibility of the West – and therefore, Russia is more interested to put the West in a position when it will be forced (or interested) to break this promise.

Thus, it is unlikely that Putin's regime started the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 to change the world order and the hegemony of the West; however, given the contemporary scope of the war, however, the regime seems to believe that winning the war could have global implications. The specific definitions of 'victory' in this context, however, are uncertain and most likely change depending on the development of the war – for example, even managing to keep control over territories annexed by Russia in 2022 could be interpreted as a 'victory' (with Russia managing to achieve military superiority over a country receiving generous support of the powerful Western coalition).

5 The Trump Factor

Throughout the last decade, Russian foreign policy was based on a 'hierarchy of adversaries': the US and the UK were seen as a strategic rival threatening Russia's position, while European countries (France and Germany) were seen as more open to deals with Russia (but at the same time fundamentally incapable of independent policy, being completely under control from Washington). After 2022, the attitudes of the Russian elites and public towards the EU countries quickly deteriorated – currently Russia does not seem to have any hopes with respect to improving political relations with Germany, and Germany is seen as hostile as other Western countries (Levada Center 2022). But still, the US and the UK (the 'Anglo-Saxons' in the Russian propaganda, see RBC 2023) were seen as primary enemies. This seems to have changed somewhat after Trump's election to presidency.

On the one hand, the willingness of Trump to engage in negotiations with Moscow is likely to be perceived as a major opportunity by the Putin's regime. What is even more important, it is seen as chance to exit the current deadlock by the part of the elites, which is loyal to Putin but believes that the costs of the war are too large for

Russia and, unlike Putin, is pessimistic about the war's possible outcome (Baunov 2025). Trump's offer to Russia (at the very least, from the point of view of the publicly available information) could, in fact, fulfill some of the expectations Putin's regime started the goal with (in particular, in terms of protecting Russian control over at least part of its sphere of influence). This is of course very attractive for the regime.

On the other hand, three arguments, in the Moscow's eyes, speak against accepting Trump's offer. First, one is uncertain how the next US administration would act vis-à-vis Russia – essentially, the US (and the West in general) are seen as partners unable to engage in credible commitments. Second, one is equally uncertain whether the current offer is the final one – possibly, continuing the war will bring new, and more attractive offers from the West on the negotiation table. And third, and most importantly, would accepting Trump's offer make it possible for Russia to credibly present the end of the war in Ukraine as an end of the American hegemony? Would it indeed lead the way to the multipolar world?

This uncertainty explains the highly ambiguous course of actions of the Russian leadership, on the one hand, trying to maintain the negotiations with the US, but on the other hand, increasing its attacks on Ukraine. Rhetorically, Russian propaganda currently inverts the traditional hierarchy of enemies – with Europe being presented as more hostile to Russia than the US (Meduza 2025). However, fundamentally, this does not change the strategic view of the Putin's regime supporting the idea of the multipolar world, with the US being one pole among many.

6 Conclusions

It remains to summarize the main arguments of this paper. Russia does not aspire to achieve a leading role in the world or to return to the bipolar world of the Cold War era. At the same time, a unipolar world dominated by the West is also unacceptable for Russia: Russia's ideal vision of the international relations is that of a multipolar world, with several powerful countries controlling their spheres of influence. The war of Ukraine did not start as an attack on the Western hegemony as such – rather, Russia believed that achieving quick and decisive victory it will protect its 'natural' sphere of influence from the West. At the same time, the extent to which the West publicly declared its commitment to support Ukraine, made the possible benefits of winning (or, at least, not losing) the war even higher for Russia – it would demonstrate the weakness of the West and its inability to keep up its own promises, i.e. will have implications well beyond post-Soviet Eurasia. The extent to which Russia's perception of this goal changed after Trump became president is unclear.

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