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The New Era of Confrontation

Response by Richard Sakwa, University of Kent, to

Russia and the World: 2020 IMEMO Forecast

The annual reports published by IMEMO on Russia and the state of world affairs act like the rings on a tree, measuring changes over time by offering a snapshot of a particular instant. This report is no different, but comes at a time that could scarcely be more unlike earlier years. The Covid-19 pandemic has acted like a savage beam of light, illuminating processes that were apparent yet not fully revealed. The pandemic has also accelerated many of these processes, accentuating what had already been observed to be ‘the great acceleration’, the speeding up of historical processes in recent years. Drawing on the analysis presented in the IMEMO report, this comment identifies three key interrelated issues that are now subject to accelerated change: first, the broader retreat of the post-1945 ‘Yalta’ international system established at the end of the Second World War, focused above all on the United Nations; second, the decay of the post-1989 settlement, which turned out not to be a *settlement* in any meaningful sense; and third, the return of a certain type of great power relations in the Covid era. The emergence of the rudiments of bipolarity signals the onset of a new era of confrontation, with few of the guardrails of the First Cold War and none of the clear ideological markers of the earlier era, rendering this era more dangerous than that of the post-war conflict and more akin to the period leading up to the First World War.

The Yalta system in retreat

The Yalta system established at the end of the Second World War was always more than about the Soviet occupation of large parts of Eastern Europe, although this is the aspect that has been the most salient in commentary. It was at Yalta in February 1945 that final agreement was reached about how the United Nations would be structured, and thus it was at this meeting of the three leaders of the wartime alliance that the foundations of the post-war international system were laid. Although over-shadowed by the creation of what became the Soviet bloc, the Yalta system created the framework for the system of sovereign internationalism that endures to the present day. It was within this framework that decolonisation took place, and ultimately the restoration of the full sovereignty of the East European states.

This international system consists of three layers (or three stories of an edifice). The multilateral institutions of global governance are found on the top floor, notably the UN and the various UN agencies (notably in the present context, the World Health Organisation). They were reinforced by the Bretton Woods institutions, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, flanked by international legal, human rights, environmental and other economic governance institutions. Also on the top floor are the various trade agreements and the infrastructure of global commerce and services that after 1989 were dubbed ‘globalisation’. The US always chafed at the impediments this multilateralism imposes on its freedom of action, and during the Covid-19 pandemic moved even further to distance itself from these constraints. On the middle floor we find competing states and their accompanying ‘world orders’, such as the US-led liberal international order (LIO) and the Russo-Chinese alignment in defence of sovereign (or conservative) internationalism. The Moscow-Beijing alignment is ‘conservative’ in the substantive meaning of the word, defending the sovereign

internationalism of the Yalta system against the expansive universalism of the LIO. Great power relations are accompanied by attempts to advance their respective hegemonies, which takes the form of competing world order agendas. Political and military confrontation is accompanied by epistemological struggles over how to interpret world order.

This epistemological struggle takes place on the ground floor where civil society groups, think tanks, policy institutes and civil associations try to shape the cultural landscape of international politics. Groups trying to push responses to the climate catastrophe up the global agenda are found here, as are movements fighting for nuclear disarmament and peace, as well as racial and historical justice. This is also where grass-roots nationalism is fostered and national populist movements germinate. This is also where transnational corporations compete, and where some of the 'new oligarchs' seek to shape international affairs. George Soros at the head of the Open Society Institute has long been a major player in this respect, arousing the ire not only of countries such as Hungary or Russia, where he is accused of interfering in domestic matters, but also the US, when he challenges some of the country's policies. The pandemic also brought to the fore major health care and epidemiological institutes, notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, again provoking no end of conspiracy theories.

The post-1989 situation

At all levels the promise of 1989 was not fulfilled. Marxist historicism – the view that the meaning and purpose of history could be known and thus controlled – gave way to a liberal historicism. Europe as a continent was unable to regain its political subjectivity, let alone sovereignty, as it remained part of the Atlantic power system created in the wake of the Second World War, and then whose links were apparently indissolubly forged in the Cold War. It was this power system that emerged reinvigorated and ambitious after 1989, and which in the end pressed at Russia's frontiers in physical terms and which made civilisational claims on the Russian mind. Above all, the grand substitution at the end of the Cold war, when one model of world order claimed to be universal and synonymous with order itself, has helped forge the conservative counter-alignment – the rudiments of a new global bipolarity.

The Atlantic power system after 1989 rebranded itself as the 'liberal international order', and with the end of bipolarity and other balancing forces, this particular order was free to proclaim itself synonymous with order itself. This meant that the institutions on the top floor of the international system effectively were claimed to be the property of the liberal order. A specific order substituted for the system in its entirety. Struggles over the legitimacy of this substitution underlie the great power conflicts of our time (Porter 2020).

The moment of liberation in 1989 proved a false dawn, and three decades later the continent is once again divided, propaganda has given way to an information war that is as intense as anything seen during the Cold War, military exercises prepare for war once again in the heart of Europe, nuclear confrontation is returning to the anarchical condition prevalent at the dawn of the nuclear age as the arms control architecture is systematically dismantled, and peoples are set against peoples as the 'image of the enemy' is rebuilt through memory and history wars.

Globalisation transformed China and hence for a time it was willing to go along with the substitution. Russia was never quite so supportive, arguing from the first that the substitution was illicit and part of the hegemonic claims of the liberal order. Russia supported the multilateral bodies on the top floor, but resisted their appropriation through hegemonic claims of the LIO. Russia instead defended the autonomy of international governance institutions, and it is now joined by China in this defence. This is the underlying structural

reason for the estrangement between Russia and the political West. The alienation was deepened by the advance of the military wing of the LIO, with NATO advancing to Russia's borders. The Atlantic powers argue, with good reason, that there was no sustained attempt to exclude Russia, but there nevertheless no place for Russia in the new system, thus provoking the cold peace between 1989 and 2014.

These larger structural changes in the management of the internal system are accompanied by a turn against globalisation. The events of 2020, and above all the coronavirus pandemic, accelerated the demise of the 40-year cycle of neo-liberal state negation, extended global supply chains and interdependent economics. The idea of state-managed industrial policies had already been creeping in after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09, but the pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of extended and distant supply chains, especially for pharmaceutical items and personal protective equipment. Critiques of multilateralism and globalisation were intensified, with technological innovation one of the fronts in the new confrontation. One country after another followed the American lead to force Huawei out of mobile communication systems. This was done not so much out of security concerns but for geopolitical reasons. Technological innovation and dissemination had always been a core element of globalisation, but even that is now on the retreat. Even space exploration, the last frontier of cooperation between the US and Russia, is fragmenting, with Russia aligning with China's ambitious moon programme and moving away from cooperation with the US. Even here, there is a growing bipolarity.

In this context, Russia's stance is sometimes perceived as a reactionary defence of the Yalta system. This gave birth to the UN and endowed the country with a privileged status in the Security Council, but at Helsinki in 1975 the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) at first affirmed Yalta (in terms of 1945 borders and the security), and then transcended it, by affirming the universalism of human rights in inter-state relations. However, Moscow's concern is not with recreating patterns of dominance with which Yalta is associated, although it does have concern over the Helsinki modifications, but on the more narrow agenda of defending the model of internationalism represented by the Yalta system (cf. Cunliffe 2020). The Russian charge of double standards against the liberal international order arises because of its hegemonic assertions, which include the right to define how and when international law is applied. As Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov (2016, 2020), repeatedly notes, a 'rules-based order' is not the same as the rigorous application of international law, as vested in our times in the UN and its institutions.

Paradoxically, as the backlash in the US and some other countries has grown against the perceived excesses of globalisation including the outsourcing of manufacturing and technological innovation to other countries, internationalism and multilateralism also became subject to critique. This is why defenders of liberal internationalism were so alarmed by Trumpian nationalism, fearing that the baby of liberal hegemony would be thrown out with the bathwater of disadvantageous globalisation.

In a paradoxical way, this represents the revenge of 1989. In that year several cycles of history came to an end: the short-term Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe and its associated Cold War; the medium-term struggle between Soviet-style revolutionary socialism and the capitalist democracies; and the long-term idea of revolutionary emancipation against the class power of exploitative classes. The very concept of 'revolution' changed, and instead of the French revolutionary idea of a linear escape forwards into history, its original meaning of an endless cycle of rise, maturity and decay was restored. In 1989, it was not so much history that ended, but the belief in a progressive and emancipatory version of that history. Instead, of the newly-liberated post-communist countries joining with the established capitalist democracies to create a new version of post-revolutionary development, the

ideology of ‘returnism’ prevailed – the belief that the spatial ‘return to Europe’ would be enough to compensate for the absence of a co-created version of the future (Sakwa 2020).

Russia at first accepted elements of this returnist ideology, but the combination of status concerns and national interests meant that this could not be the path for the country. Although much weakened by the Soviet disintegration and the chaotic post-communist transition, Moscow entered the new era in the belief that the historical West could become a greater West by Russia’s addition. There could be no simple ‘return’ to something that Russia had never been part of, but there may well have been an opportunity to create something new. At the most basic level this would have meant a new security order for Europe, rather than the enlargement of an already functioning security community headed by a country outside Europe and which had been created precisely to contain the state to which Russia became the successor. It would also have meant a boost to ideas of European pan-continentalism, finally putting an end to the long-term division of the continent through some sort of neo-Gaullist ‘greater Europe’. Above all, it would have meant an intellectual revolution commensurate with the promise of 1989 – the end of the belief that one group or nation had the solution to the riddle of history, and instead through dialogue and diplomacy a new historical community could be created.

Great powers in the age of Covid-19

This is the world analysed by the IMEMO report, and this particular tree ring will be examined in years to come as a very special year – not for its achievements but as the culmination of a long period of degradation – a degradation that in certain respects has accelerated as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, but which the crisis has at the same time exposed. The IMEMO report vividly demonstrates that very few of these processes are positive, let alone progressive in a way that would have been understood by earlier generations of politicians and activists. A sense of powerlessness is accentuated by the absence of any sense of direction in history. Politics is increasingly reactive and short-term, responding to immediate crises while failing to articulate a positive vision of the future.

The 2020 pandemic struck at a time when the balance of forces and ideological commitments was already in flux. The intensifying crisis of world order is marked by the re-emergence of great power conflict and a nascent return to a bipolar structure to international politics, with the US and its allies on the one side, and China and those who align with it on the other. As in the original period of the bipolarity in the First Cold War, certain major powers (India, Russia and some others) retain a degree of foreign of foreign policy autonomy, but their behaviour is structured by the intensifying power field generated by the Sino-US confrontation. Drawing from the report, what are the central features of the crisis?

First, the militarisation that accompanies the return of great power confrontation diverts resources into non-productive activities. Most European countries cashed in the ‘peace dividend’ after 1989, but since 2014 have been exhorted by NATO to spend no less than two per cent of GDP on defence. The US has regularly spent nearly double this, with a defence appropriation in 2020 of \$738 billion. Regular military exercises now take place on both sides of the new ‘iron curtain’ that once again divides Europe. However, the pandemic cruelly exposed the shortcoming in health and social care provision in some leading Western countries, and the inadequacy of the ‘optimisation’ programme in Russia, which closed at least half of rural hospitals and halved the number of beds available. However, the Soviet-era legacy of the vast provision of in-patient facilities means that Russia coped relatively well with the health crisis, although not without strains that exposed the vulnerability of an excessively resource-based economy and over-centralised governance system. This is why regional governors were granted great leeway to deal with Covid-19.

Second, the pandemic exposed the vulnerability of unequal societies, with the most endangered sectors of society (often reflecting class, ethnic and occupational differentiation) suffering the most. The financial crisis of 2008 was followed by no fundamental rethink of economic models, but today the deleterious effects of the old growth model are being rethought. The old growth-driven energy-intensive model is questioned as never before, hence talk in the European Union of a Green Deal, which could act as one of the motors to propel Europe out of the post-Covid economic recession. The pandemic accelerated the decarbonisation of the global economy and the shift towards renewable energy resources, including the use of electric motors for transport. The pandemic was as much a psychological as an economic shock, exposing the vulnerability of humanity on an increasingly stressed planet. Even if this shock is not immediately transferred into policy, it will have an enduring effect.

Third, the trend over the last thirty years towards great power confrontation has accelerated. Instead of bringing nations together, the pandemic has reinforced nationalism and egotistical responses. This is not universal, and after a hesitant start, the EU developed some impressive solidarity programmes, although the rub will be in how resources are distributed and the conditions attached to their disbursement. At the same time, the trend towards a nascent bipolarism in international affairs has accelerated. Sino-US contradictions have long been gathering force, but the pandemic exposed the harsh antagonism between the two powers. This is not the same bipolarity of the Cold War years, when the dynamic US and its allies faced an ultimately declining Soviet Union. At its peak in the early 1970s, Soviet GDP reached 58 per cent of that of the US and thereafter declined, whereas China is a genuine peer competitor whose strength will only increase.

Fourth, the crisis exposed the marginalisation of both Russia and the EU. Although both are still obviously important actors, with Russia still the leading power in central Eurasia and an active participant in the Middle East and North Africa, it nevertheless increasingly finds itself in the position of other 'lands in between' – forced to choose between alternatives formulated elsewhere. This is why Moscow has worked so hard to develop a 'heartland' strategy, whose latest manifestations are the Eurasian Economic Union and, more broadly, the Greater Eurasia Partnership. As for the EU, contrary to expectations at the time, after 1989 it remained a subaltern element of the Atlantic power system, and thereby lost much of its political subjectivity. In recent years it has struggled to achieve 'strategic autonomy', and remains an important global actor, but the new bipolarity means that it too is squeezed between forces over which it has no control. The failure to achieve at least a minimal neo-Gaullist agenda of pan-continental unity has led to both halves of the continent becoming less than what the sum of the parts may have become. This is why the French president, Emmanuel Macron (2019), has called for some sort of rapprochement with Moscow, provoking the ire of the Atlanticists. As the IMEMO report notes, 'The CEE countries are more loyal to NATO than the old members'; and, we may add, more loyal ultimately to NATO than the EU. This guarantees the EU's continued marginalisation.

Fifth, the crisis of 2020 represented both a vindication and a crisis of multilateralism. Despite the criticisms of the early handling of the pandemic by the WHO, in the end the body proved how essential it was to managing global health risks. However, unlike during the global financial crisis, the G20 group of states failed to act as the coordinating mechanism for recovery, while the G7 confirmed its irrelevance. As recent Valdai Club reports have argued, the old system is crumbling, while the shape of the new one is unclear (Barabanov et al, 2018, 2020), a view reinforced by the IMEMO report when it laconically notes that the pandemic 'will not become a driver of the search for global compromises and agreements'. At the same time, technology has long been transforming the world of work, but the lockdown forced an accelerated shift of labour and teaching to online platforms, thereby

fundamentally transforming the labour process. Old exploitations were intensified, while new ones were introduced. At the same time, counter-movement began to emerge driven by the environmental, epidemiological and social challenges of the twenty-first century, transcending national rivalries and strategic tensions (Lo 2020).

Conclusion

Two types of breakdown are occurring simultaneously, and it is important for analytical purposes to distinguish between them. The first is the long-term degradation of the post-war ‘Yalta’ international system, with its system of multilateral governance designed to constrain national animosities while allowing the Security Council to act as a forum to temper great power conflicts. Repeated plans for UN reform have been advanced to allow the post-war international system to reflect the balance of power today, notably by bringing in some of the rising powers like India, Japan, Brazil and an African champion. The second is provoked by the expansive ambition of the post-Cold War liberal order, aspiring to a type of global hegemony. After 1989 the sovereign internationalism institutionalised by the Yalta system was undermined by the radicalisation of one of the world orders that it had sponsored. The US-led liberal world order substituted for the international system, thus provoking a chain of reactions that are visible today. Liberal internationalism became subsumed by a specific power system and cultural constellation, and thereby lost not only its universal appeal but also its internal integrity.

In these conditions, there cannot be any normalisation until some fundamental issues are resolved. Top of the list is the relationship between the international system and various contending models of world order and the sovereign states of which they are composed. In other words, a new balance between multilateralism and nationalism needs to be found. This will probably be found by drawing on traditional representations of sovereign internationalism rather than the hegemonic and cosmopolitan globalism that came to predominate after 1989. The double degradation outlined above entails the intensification of conflict between world orders, accompanied by the weakening ability of the post-1945 Yalta system to constrain this new bipolar struggle on a global scale. The instruments of battle are sanctions, informational warfare, revived industrial policies (that open the door to protectionism), militarisation and the continued dismantling of Cold War arms control mechanisms. As the IMEMO report notes, ‘The emerging negative uncertainty does not provide grounds for optimistic forecasts’. We can agree with this judgment only to the point to suggest that this assessment is not negative enough. When a previous international system, the one created in Vienna in 1815, was in its final stages of ‘crumbling’ in the early years of the twentieth century, it took two world wars for a new one to emerge. The presence of nuclear weapons today means that it will take a maximum of one war to create a new international system, if anything survives amidst the ruins of the old.

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