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How to survive in a world of fierce competition between great powers

A perspective from Ukraine

Considering the events of recent months, many believe that Donald Trump is destroying the world order, thereby undermining the security of Europe, Ukraine and the West. This assessment is based mainly on the American president's harsh statements to some allies, his principled refusal to engage in the job of the world's policeman and unilateral actions such as the introduction of trade tariffs.

Perhaps these steps will indeed change some of the rules of the game in international politics. But a change in the rules need not always undermine security - more often it simply changes the conditions under which leaders have to find ways to strengthen it. Trump probably wants not so much to destroy the world order as to adapt American strategy to a fundamentally changed world. Europe will have to do the same.

A supremely difficult task

Where does American revisionism come from? In short, from the long process of redistribution of wealth, influence and power in the world, as a result of which the US lost its hegemony and the world became bipolar. The rise of China, which lasted more than forty years, eventually changed the balance of power completely, turning the Middle Kingdom into a true superpower. Trump, like most American presidents of the last century, sees international politics in terms of realism, with its constant competition, right to power, and a view of world politics predominantly as a zero-sum game. As long as no state approached the US in terms of power, the engagement strategy could work. But today it must be abandoned.

What does this mean for Europe? First of all, the need to remember how to survive in a world of intense great power competition. Once upon a time, for example, in the 19th century, it was European states that set the standards of *realpolitik*. Later, during the Cold War, thanks to American security guarantees, they built up their own economies and even became

competitors for the US, creating and expanding the EU. But if Washington today needs allies capable of sharing risks and costs, Europe will have to reconsider its own approaches to security.

It is not just about money: increasing defence spending, even substantially, may not be enough. We will also have to reconsider, say, the role of the EU's normative power; the meaning of 'European values' and values in general; create a new doctrinal basis for security policy; and reconsider strategic relations with other centres of power, such as China or India. It is likely that in a world of fierce great power competition, such a policy will have to become pragmatic, and perhaps even somewhat cynical.

Europe must become strong in a basic, realist sense.

The new architecture of the world will shine a brighter spotlight on Europe's weaknesses. Key among them are the economy, which is losing the technological rivalry with China and the US, and the decision-making process. Without compensating for these weaknesses, any decision to increase defence spending will be only temporary.

Europe must become strong in a basic, realist sense. And this is a supremely difficult task with an unpredictable outcome. Not only Trump, but also the international agenda of the coming years will value strength. For this reason, Washington will need dialogue with Moscow even after the hot phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war is over.

Competition over rules

Ukraine, unfortunately, finds itself at the epicentre of these changes. Its security is not guaranteed - and cannot be guaranteed in principle. The survival and fate of small states in the emerging international order depends on their ability to correctly assess the balance of power and adapt to existing contradictions or a coalition of stronger states. In this sense, Ukraine's goal of joining NATO and the EU is understandable but has never looked achievable. Like Europe, Ukraine will have to deeply rethink its own security policy.

It no longer makes sense to rely on NATO membership and unconditional transatlantic solidarity. Ukrainian approaches to security must become more pragmatic, as must dialogue with partners. Europe's role in Ukrainian security calculations is growing. The US administration's moves create grounds for a tactical rapprochement between Ukraine and the EU, but there is no guarantee yet that Europe,

in turn, will support Ukraine for as long as necessary. The real indicator of a strategic shift in security calculations may be the prospect of Ukraine's membership in the EU - albeit probably after the ceasefire.

The prospect of freezing the war at the expense of Ukraine's interests - ones that Trump believes are unrealistic to achieve - is getting much closer. In his system of coordinates, it seems that agreements with Moscow look much more promising than continued indefinite support for Ukraine. American security guarantees for Ukraine, in any form, also look unrealistic.

The international order is a set of rules of the game, formal and informal, which guide states in their relations with each other. When people talk about 'an order built on rules', there is a certain substitution of concepts: any international order is built on rules. Even if there is only one rule: 'no rules work'.

In the version of the international order that is now changing, there were far more rules. For example, most states were forbidden to build nuclear weapons, free trade was encouraged, and great powers did not go to war with each other. Some of these rules were enshrined in international regimes, some were informal but fairly robust arrangements. Which, by the way, are still in force. The destabilisation of the world, the impotence of international organisations, the growth of spending on weapons or the number/intensity of wars do not necessarily indicate the collapse of the international order.

US involvement in world affairs was indeed an important, though by no means the only, element of the international order.

But when one speaks of a 'rules-based order,' one often refers to the special role of the United States, which is expected to support global security, and perhaps even justice.

Such rhetoric is especially prominent where US involvement, resources, or commitment is seriously counted on. For example, in Europe, where they are accustomed to reliable and relatively cheap American defence; or in Ukraine, for which American aid is crucial in the war with Russia.

At the same time, of course, the US has not always intervened in wars on the side of the weak in defence of justice. Nor has it provided security guarantees to everyone. And attempts to be the world's policeman have often provoked cautious reactions or direct criticism. But US involvement in world affairs was indeed an important, though by no means the only, element of the international order.
Trump wants to change US grand strategy by reducing the level of this

engagement and focusing on unilateralism and relative advantage. He, too, is looking for ways to strengthen US security and influence - perhaps even to the point of restoring former US hegemony. Some rules may be changed in the process or even broken, but this is of secondary importance to national security interests.

For the international order, the significance of such moves is that they set off a chain reaction, forcing other influential centres of power in the modern world to resort to more competitive strategies. Those who correctly understand the signals of the changing structure will succeed. Others will lose.



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