

It is NOT Yalta 2.0 – yet, but the contours of a new world order are getting clearer

By Dmitri Trenin / 18 February 2025

There is a lot of agitation, primarily and unsurprisingly in Europe, regarding the start of the U.S.-Russian dialogue. Much of the comment is way over the top. However, the new “ten days that shook the world” were not a storm in a teacup. The words said, and the steps made by U.S. President Donald Trump, Vice President J.D. Vance and other key members of the Republican administration suggest that the speed of the process of the world order change has markedly accelerated.

The main reason for that is that the United States, under Trump’s leadership, has stopped resisting the process of change and joined it instead, seeking to lead: a well-known tactic. Indeed, in a multipolar world which, in the words of U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, is already a reality, the United States has a good chance of becoming a *primus inter pares*. To strengthen America’s claim to primacy, Trump is willing to stop clinging to its waning hegemony. Thus, it makes sense to reverse Washington’s contract with the allies along the theme of John F. Kennedy’s memorable lines, “don’t ask what America can do for you; ask what you can do for America”.

Trump’s proposed deal for North America, from Greenland to Canada to Mexico to Panama, is straightforward. You all become part of the imperial metropole, absorbed by, or at least permanently tied to the United States, and you will enjoy the prosperity of the world’s largest economy and the protection of the mighty U.S. military. South America is an extension of the North, tied to it more loosely than the immediate neighbors of the United States, but its links to other major powers outside the Western Hemisphere will be subject to Washington’s close scrutiny. The Monroe doctrine still stands.

In contrast to that, Europe, for Trump, is a pampered child that, having enjoyed for too long U.S. indulgence and protection, has lost its good senses and now has to come back to them and start paying its way. It’s a dependent territory of the American empire that has a voice but no vote within it. The European Union is not, and is not going to be, a great power. In and of themselves, neither the EU nor NATO are indispensable tools of U.S. foreign policy; what is truly important is enhancing America’s dominance over Europe, ending its pretense of being a co-equal partner in the Transatlantic relationship, and a powerful economic competitor of the U.S. Europe’s geopolitical role, seen by Trump, is being a counter-weight to Russia in western Eurasia.

In Eurasia’s east, China, of course, is the United States’ real main adversary. Trump and his acolytes have long been focused on China as the biggest challenge to America. They are absolutely resolved to rebuff it and make sure that Beijing never rises above its current position of the multipolar world’s Number Two power. Trump’s people recognize that China’s is a very different challenge than was the Soviet Union’s, but they also see that multipolarity is a more propitious environment for reaching America’s objectives than was the bipolar setup of the Cold War era. Instead of mounting a costly global campaign against its sole formidable adversary, the United States can use the more diffuse nature of multipolarity to play the game of great power balancing.

India, of course, immediately comes to mind. In the emerging world order it is, alongside America, China, and Russia, a fourth great power. Trump has hosted Prime Minister Narendra Modi among the first month's visitors to the White House. Both sides have a vested interest in expanding their relations, particularly in the economic and technological spheres. Even if Delhi's relations with Beijing have improved a bit since the Modi-Xi get-together on the margins of last October's BRICS summit in Kazan, this partial stabilization has not put to rest the rivalry between Asia's two giants.

This is the wider context in which the U.S.-Russia relations are evolving. Looking back, Biden's and Obama's policies, in Trump's view, were unnecessarily pushing Russia toward China, and helping create a Eurasian quasi-bloc which also included Iran and North Korea. By mishandling Russia over Ukraine and NATO, and ejecting it from the G8, the Democratic administrations failed to diminish Russia's role, but turned Moscow into the leading world champion of the non-/anti-Western cause.

Trump has apparently accepted Joe Biden's signal failure to bring Russia onto its knees by inflicting a strategic military defeat on it in Ukraine; destroying Russia's economy and finances; and isolating the country politically and logistically. His aim is to stop the fighting in Ukraine along the present frontline; keep Kiev as a Western outpost on Russia's border, mostly sustained and protected by Europe; and loosening Moscow's ties with Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang.

From the Kremlin's standpoint, phone call and opening talks are a good sign. Respectful attitude on the part of the U.S. leads to better understanding and reduces the risks of miscalculation. Russians appreciate that Trump doesn't want to inherit Biden's war. Yet, prospects for an early Russo-U.S. agreement are not terribly high. Trump doesn't have a peace plan; Putin has one, but it remains anathema to many in the Trump administration. As for wider world issues, U.S. and Russian interests diverge greatly and often clash. American expectations that Russia is desperate to reach a deal with the United States and will accept Trump's terms are illusory.

With talks under way, the war continues. Russians understand that it is the resilience of their country – political, economic, and social – and the power of the Russian military that foiled Biden's strategy and made Trump talk ceasefire. But Putin doesn't need a ceasefire, he wants to resolve the problem that led to the special military operation in the first place, and to secure the gains that this operation has produced. Putin also knows that any guarantees that Russia can rely upon are those that Russia itself can provide.

That said, don't hold your breath for a Yalta 2. There will be no peace conference in the foreseeable future, but a new world order is emerging even without it. That order will be organized on different levels – global, continental, regional, as well as many functional ones – around the capable and influential players representing various civilizations and cultures. In geopolitical terms, the first version of multipolarity will probably be a quadrangle (not a tetrarchy) of America, China, India and Russia. The Ukraine war – whenever it ends, - and Trump's second presidency are important milestones on the way to it.

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