

## **International Threats-2016**

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A lot has been said recently about unpredictability of Russian foreign policy and uncertainty that emanates from it. In reality, Moscow's interests are quite limited and focused on its near abroad. To understand how Russia prioritizes its security challenges and how it assesses security situation on its borders is a halfway to battle uncertainty in Eurasia. This analysis focuses on critical situations that may develop this year into vital challenges to Russian interests and trigger Moscow's response.

It has been two years since Russia found itself in the middle of a geopolitical tornado. Could it deliberately stay out of it? We believe not. In nature, wind emerges because of differential pressures between regions. Similarly, in politics conflicts emerge with a change in balance of power and destruction of a status-quo. Regime collapses in Ukraine and in the Middle East created a low-pressure zone that draws the neighboring countries into the regional storm. Having found itself in a hurricane spiral, Moscow made its choice. It could have lowered the sails and follow the winds, yet it preferred to keep to its course even though it means sailing against the wind.

Moscow's offensive has its accomplishments – Russia is holding the initiative and managing crises wisely for its own purposes. However, in recent months Russia missed at least two sensitive blows. The first one was the miscalculation of the consequences of the public protests in Kyiv in winter 2014, the second was the misperception of risks of a military provocation from Turkey in the Russian Syrian operation. However cautious Moscow is in its foreign policy, blind spots trouble every experienced operator.

In its worldview, Russia is a great power chauvinist and a hard power athlete. Modern Russia is a status quo player focused predominantly on its nearest

abroad. Neither Russian security priorities, nor its resources do not compel Moscow to project power beyond 1000 kilometers from its borders. Basics of Russian security strategy are simple: keep neighboring belt stable, NATO weak, China close, and US focused elsewhere. Russia support and abide international rules, but only until a third party ruin the status quo and harm Moscow's security interests. When Russia sees the security environment around it certain and predictable it feels no need for intervention. But when uncertainty arises and a crisis unleashes, Russia respond forcefully.

### **Logic of a US-Russia divide**

How Russia sees its place in the current global competition? Rivalry between the two centers of world gravity – the US and China – in defining the rules of international order is the key process in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And as the Atlantic bloc is gradually losing its weight the US have shifted from expanding to defending their positions. This American strategy may be tagged 'new enclosure', i.e. creating exclusive zones enclosed from rivals – first and foremost from China – with economic, political and other kinds of barriers.

Moscow asses the US policy towards itself as a preventive attack carried out before Russia restores its historic place after the period of crisis. Clamped weak deep in the continent, Russia will not be a serious economic rival and will not be able to form an alternative center of power in Eurasia. Weakened Russia will be kept in fear of Chinese expansion and will be forced to become an American partner in Washington's major project for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – containment of China. And as long as American elites aim for the global leadership their strategy of weakening Russia has no alternatives. There is no use looking for conspiracy in this strategy – Russia simply happens to be in the way of the US plans. It makes no difference to Washington whether Russian elites are pro- or anti-American – their position only affects the way the US achieve their goals. With Putin as the Russian president Washington is saved from trouble of paying its opponent compliments, and can easily trip Moscow up.

The way American elites refuse to abandon the idea of global leadership, Moscow may not afford being weak. Russia has always been under pressure of rival civilizations of West and South, and the pressure is still growing. The goal of the current sanctions war is to exhaust and drain Russia, making it use up its limited resources, and to create a feeling of despair and inevitability of collapse among the public. Being a weak country Russia chooses to escape direct strikes and distract the offender shifting the front line far from its territories.

Russia's first attempt to seize the initiative was the 'Turn to the East' and the Ufa BRICS Summit aimed at mobilization of allies. However, it was successful only partly. The BRICS countries were not ready to sacrifice their relations with the US, and the 'Turn' could not bring fast results to influence the current balance of power.

Second and a more successful attempt was the Russian operation in Syria. Europe's exhaustion from the Ukrainian crisis and the migrant crisis contributed to its effectiveness. But the main reason was the stalemate that the US policy found itself between the declared goal to overthrow Al-Assad and impossibility to allow a victory of ISIS. Trying to find a way out the US decided at least temporarily to accept Russia's offer to change the game. Yet, the general goal to make Moscow surrender never disappeared. And even though it is not a key short-term goal for the US, they will never resist the temptation to use emerging possibilities to weaken Moscow.

### **The Syrian crisis and the conflict with Turkey**

From the Russian point of view, allowing ISIS to gain control over Syria and Iraq would mean a new influx of well-trained terrorists in the North Caucasus and Central Asia in five years. According to Russian data, out of 70 thousand ISIS militants up to 5 thousand either are Russians or come from CIS countries. Their return back home will tremendously influence the already fragile situation in the Russian Caucasus and Central Asian republics. In these circumstances, Moscow

believes it is cheaper to fight Islamists in the Middle East than at home after they come back.

Russian strategy in Syria is advantageous for with minimal resources spent and low scale involvement Moscow achieves a lot. In order to get what it wants Russia only needs to disorganize the terrorist infrastructure with no need for their complete destruction. Russia will preserve the friendly regime in Damascus in this or that form, it will be able to strengthen its first major naval base in the Mediterranean and retain its leadership in offshore gas projects in Syria, Cyprus and Israel.

Russia will consolidate its posture in the Middle East as a country able to exercise expeditionary military campaigns. The Syrian operation is a display of Russian arms capabilities, satellite communications and GLONASS navigation system –their high efficiency, accuracy and reliability. Russia's arms marketing in the Middle East is a clear evidence that Moscow preserves full sovereignty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare.

Profits that Russia can get because of the Syrian campaign are great – but so are the risks. Unintentionally, Russia started confrontation with an important regional power – Turkey. Ankara's interest is to topple Bashar Al-Assad, and it is using the fight against ISIS to combat Kurdish armed groups in Syria. It is not the first time that regional differences arise between Russia and Turkey, yet it has been a century since they used force against each other.

In the worst case scenario Ankara and Moscow may now become first parties to a “revolution in military affairs” type war, where there is no frontline or thousands of victims, but damage is caused to space satellites, communication systems, logistic hubs and Internet infrastructure.

However, the key risk for Russia is getting drawn into the regional Sunni-Shia confrontation on the side of Iran, which is opposed by a coalition of Sunni states led by Saudi Arabia. Taking into consideration the Sunni majority of Russian Muslims, Moscow should be especially cautious.

In this context Russia will find it hard to ensure support of the Syrian Sunni that oppose ISIS. With its Chechen experience, Russia will aim to settle the Syrian conflict by enabling cooperation between the regime and leaders of Sunni communities who are ready to join the fight against terrorists. In case of success, they will be the ones to fill the power vacuum after ISIS defeat – similarly to what happened with the Kadyrovs in Chechnya.

### **Metastases of jihadi terror**

Regions where armed jihadi groups act are interconnected on the principle of communicating vessels. The flow of militants from the Palestine, Libya, Syria and Afghanistan to the Caucasus and Central Asia and back is an urgent problem. Even if the coalitions to fight terrorists in Syria are successful, this will not mean a victory over terrorism in general. Most qualified militants and commanders will most probably move from Syria to other countries (Iraq, Libya, Mali, Afghanistan, Somali, etc.). The deep insuperable crisis that state institutions in Middle East and Africa find themselves in encourages well-being of jihadi mercenaries. Besides, in the last several years they have learnt to build themselves in global criminal economic chains and find support from authorities of some states. Mercenaries will remain as a kind – for it is always cheaper to maintain a group of 500 highly trained militants than to sustain a state. And this group may be enough to destabilize a whole region.

Like cancer, international terrorism is dangerous for its metastases, and their appearance in a certain place or in a certain time is just as difficult to predict. The worst scenario for Russia would be a collapse of one of weak and poor Central Asian states, and its turning into uncontrollable territories ruled by armed groups that have their own interpretation of Sharia laws. This prospect is especially dangerous since today Russia has fewer resources to support its allies than four years ago – and the sharp reduction in investment program for Kyrgyzstan is the first symptom.

What goes against this scenario in Central Asia is the Russian economy. Revolutions and civil wars have their own demographic dynamics, and until young men from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan may come and earn their living in Russia, they will not join jihadi movement to overthrow political regimes at home. The first symptom of the emergent threat will be not home political events in most poor post-Soviet republics as such, but statistical growth in sectors of Russian economy, that traditionally rely on the use of mass unqualified labor force, like construction, retail and wholesale trade, housing and communal services.

With the slowing down of the construction sector growth in Russia, most difficult situation in 2016 will be in Tajikistan, where the current leadership is exacerbating tensions by banning systemic Islamist opposition. This measure is considered a violation of the status quo, a set of peace rules that ended the 1992-1997 civil war in that country. At that time allowing Islamist representatives in political life was among the most important conditions of ending the confrontation. The Tajik authorities have been escalating their opposition to the Islamic Renaissance party, which creates a threat of its tactical union with more radical groups. The possibility of a new civil war in Tajikistan will inevitably force Russia to intervene.

### **Situation in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016**

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains one of the most dangerous challenges for the Caucasus. Sides of the conflict enter 2016 without any sign of a compromise over the key issues (i.e. status of Nagorno-Karabakh and some other Azerbaijani territories controlled by Armenian forces, and the problem of refugees).

A possibility of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict exacerbation scares both Russia and the West. The fear of confrontation ‘defreezing’ that would lead to deployment of international peacekeeping troops also bothers Iran. The latter claims that the conflict should be settled without participation of any non-regional powers. However, the Russian-Turkish confrontation – taking into consideration the

strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey as well as between Armenia and Russia – raises the risk of a war and spreading the conflict beyond the Caucasus region. In the meantime, Yerevan and Baku are watching the differences between Moscow and Washington and are trying to test the OSCE Minsk group and even the CSTO for prompt and coordinated reaction to emerging incidents.

For Russia, a breakdown of the fragile status quo will have appalling consequences. First, it will question the prospects of the Eurasian integration projects (the CSTO and EEU) for there is no consensus among their members on the political and military support for Armenia. Second, it may sharpen the conflict of interests between Moscow and Baku and even repeat the Georgian scenario of 2008. Third, weakening of Russian positions will inevitably pose question of the need for a wider internationalization of the peace process, which will ensure that the Russian influence decreases.

There are two main conditions for the negative scenario to develop around Nagorno-Karabakh. They are the deterioration of the Russian-Turkish confrontation and unprovoked escalation as a result of a snowball of minor incidents on the contact line. The conflict with Moscow may push Ankara to increase its military support for Azerbaijan in order to press harder not only on the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh, but on Armenia itself. Still, the military and political balance between Yerevan and Baku will not let either of the sides achieve an overwhelming advantage and will contain the conflict.

### **The Ukrainian crisis forecast**

Dynamic of the Ukrainian crisis in 2016 will be defined by the political situation in Kyiv. In implementing the Minsk Agreements the ball has long been in Ukraine's court. In the first half of the year Ukraine will be adopting amendments to the Constitution that will establish a special status for Donbass within the state and set rules for local elections in some areas of Donetsk and Lugansk regions. Theoretically, the Ukrainian leadership may agree to settling the conflict, though

during the last year it was trying their best to avoid it. In practical terms it remains highly unlikely.

The latest municipal elections demonstrated that President Petro Poroshenko has already got past the point when his hands were untied for reforms. Now his approval rating is slowly going down, the ruling coalition is getting weaker, and the position of the key Poroshenko's parliamentary ally, Prime Minister Yatsenyuk is openly disputed. Even if he wants to, the president would not be able to get the necessary support in Rada for a compromise with Donbass. Ukrainian politics will radicalize with the progressive weakening of the central government.

There will be two symptoms of the Donbass crisis dragging on till the second half of 2016 and most probably even further. The first one will be the failure to adopt amendments to the Constitution proposed by the president in Rada voting. These amendments do not comply with the Minsk Agreements, nonetheless the Ukrainian authorities have been referring to them as a proof of their commitment to Minsk. If Rada does not approve it in the current session, it will not be able to discuss amendments to the constitution for another year.

The second one is voting on the bill of Donbass elections, which is supposed to be approved by the sides of the conflict – Kyiv and the rebels. Judging by now, positions of the two sides are incompatible, and it is difficult to even imagine it approved – not to mention the Rada voting, where same factors that hinder introduction of president's constitutional reform arise.

Most probably, in February or March it will get obvious that conflict settlement, or at least meaningful steps towards it, will not happen in the first half of 2016. This implies that the key question will be whether Ukraine is ready to resume hostilities.

A new full-scale war in Donbass is hardly expected. The outcome of the past armed clashes between Kyiv and the People's Republics does not leave much hope for the former. Besides, it is of special interest for Russia not to let Donetsk and Lugansk lose. The West European partners within the Normandy four are also against war, which is seen by Paris and Berlin as a threat to security of the



continent. Still, there is a possibility of Kyiv's decision to launch a new offensive in Donbass because of a new exacerbation of internal political struggle in Ukraine.

In case the war resumes the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) have a clear political goal – to gain control over the whole territory of Donetsk and Lugansk regions. For Kyiv the key military risk is losing new towns in Donbass in case the new campaign fails. Moscow's decision to limit the counter offensive of the Donbass militia will depend on two conditions. The first one is how valuable in the critical moment it will find positions of its Ukrainian partners, whom it tends to listen. The second one is whether Moscow will achieve mutual understanding with Berlin and Paris on recognizing Kyiv's responsibility for unleashing the hostilities.

We would like to stress that neither Donbass, nor Moscow want a new war. It would cause great risks and inevitable huge losses. Owing to its Syrian operation, Russia has started to find a new *modus operandi* in its relations with the West, and it knows the value of this achievement. The Kyiv authorities are still quite popular with Western Europe for the latter to recognize their responsibility for the civil war. Ukraine realizes that its diplomatic positions deteriorate and will hardly dare to start a new war in such uncertain circumstances.

At the same time Kyiv will scarcely find allies that would in fact support it in its war against Donbass – except for the US. The much discussed in Ukraine Turkish involvement is rather doubtful. Naturally, Ankara will do everything to scare Moscow with its support for radical Crimean-Tatar organizations or Kyivan hawks. However, it is hard to believe that Turkish military involvement in Ukraine will find understanding in Washington – this is something that the Alliance can live without.

Fast settlement of Ukraine crisis is highly unlikely – and so is war. It seems that the situation of 2015 will repeat itself in the year 2016 – Kyiv will continue pressuring Donbass by means of bombardment and siege, avoiding meaningful negotiations on settlement. The winners will be the most patient.

## **Potential conflicts in Asia**

Security threats in East Asia will be defined by the US-China rivalry. Tensions are growing in relations between Beijing and most important military allies of Washington in the region – Japan and Australia. The most vulnerable elements of security in East Asia in 2016 will be the Taiwan issue and the exacerbating friction between the sides of territorial conflicts in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

The victory of the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan presidential elections unleashes strategic uncertainty. If the DPP will publicly reject the principle of one country or will declare Taipei's independence, Beijing will have nothing else to do, but to use military power to suppress the separatists. Risks of this scenario for the first time in four years encouraged Washington to resume military deliveries to Taiwan: in 2016 the plan is to deliver arms adding up to 1.8 billion USD. Beijing considers this step a direct signal of support to the Taiwanese authorities, and has promised a harsh reaction. It is highly expected that China will not only introduce sanctions against major arms suppliers to Taiwan, but will also pressure US companies that operate in the Chinese market.

The other permanent source of friction in East Asia is US active involvement in territorial conflicts in South China and East China Seas. In October 2015 the US destroyer Lassen started its patrol within 12 nautical miles of artificial islands built by China in the South China Sea, and in December American bombers flew closely to the Spratly Islands. Beijing's response to such actions may be very harsh. Demonstrating seriousness of Beijing's intentions, 17 December 2015 a Chinese submarine conducted a simulated attack on the US aircraft carrier Reagan. If the two sides continue this kind of dangerous military behavior, the risk of a collision is high. The two states had this sort of experience in 2001, when a Chinese destroyer crashed into a US reconnaissance plane EP-3. Apart from that, in 2016 there is a growing possibility of mutual hostilities of China and the US in the cyber space.

Major resentment of Beijing is caused by Australia and Japan actions in the South and East China Sea. Tokyo intends to station artillery batteries and ships along 200 islands along 1400 km, which will impede movement of Chinese military ship towards the Western Pacific. In August 2015 Japan approved the largest military budget in the whole after-war history (27 billion USD). And during the APEC Summit Shinzo Abe stated that his country is ready to consider the possibility of taking part in patrolling disputed territories in the South China Sea. At the same time, Australian flights over the disputed islands are not so disturbing as much as they are irritating to China. Yet, a possibility of an armed collision with Japanese or Australian military ship is high. Beijing is convinced that the US are not ready to involve automatically in an all-out conflict with China even for their key allies, and Japan's image as a historical enemy of China may stimulate escalation.

Much less likely is ignition of the smouldering conflict on the Korean peninsula. Pyongyang actions does not imply anything more than verbal threats to its adversaries. None of the states-participants of the six-side negotiation format is interested in escalating the conflict. None see a regime-change in North Korea advantageous either – it will cost a lot to level out economic and humanitarian consequences of such course of events.

### **Key risks for Russia in 2016**

Our perspective on the future of anti-Russia sanctions in 2016 is negative. Sanctions will not be lifted because this will require fulfillment of several conditions: the Minsk-2 Agreement has to be fully implemented, military provocations in Donbass have to stop, opponents of sanctions in the EU have to win over proponents of sanctions, and the EU itself has to be ready to reject solidarity with the US in the issue of sanctions – or Barack Obama has to support the EU and lift sanctions half a year before the end of his presidency. All this can definitely not be reached in 2016. Therefore, sanctions will remain, and Russia has to get used to the unfavourable external state of affairs.

Despite the West European fatigue with Ukraine and the freezing of the Donbass conflict, the US support for the Kyiv regime in 2016 will not subside and in the worst case scenario we will see US arms deliveries to Ukraine.

On the Syrian front in the short term there are risks of Russia getting giddy with its success, which may cause uncontrollable escalation of Russian-Turkish relations and a possibility of direct collision with Ankara. As a result, Russia has already found itself in a trap set by those, who want Russia stuck in the Middle East with its relations with neighbors further deteriorated. Despite Moscow's desire to demonstrate its power on every occasion, Russia may not afford to fall into such traps in the future – Syria is not Russia's key frontline.

In 2016 the destruction waves from the Middle East will increase the risk of escalation of conflicts in the South Caucasus – in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and in Central Asia, especially with the growing destabilization in Tajikistan. Popular unrest in countries that are Russian allies within the CIS may pose the question of Moscow's involvement.

World's largest economies will continue making no headway, retaining the oil prices at its record low. However, the expanding zone of military actions in the Middle East, the exacerbation of the Saudi-Iranian confrontation or destabilization within Saudi Arabia may change these calculations entirely.

China, India, Brazil and South Africa will be consumed with their own domestic problems. And despite their sympathies with Russian positions in Asia and Latin America, their banks and businesses will not do anything that may cause problems in their relations with the US.

### **Choosing between two evils**

It is obvious that in 2016 Russia will have to choose between bad and very bad alternatives. Positive changes may be expected no sooner than in seven or eight years, when a new generation of elites will come to power in the US and Europe. They may again consider Russia a strategic ally and a business partner.

What can Moscow do to make this possibility come true and to increase its own chances?

Firstly, it should be prudent, preserve its power and avoid getting dragged into full-scale wars and lengthy confrontations. It has succeeded in this by now.

Secondly, it has to carry on patiently building its relations with Western Europe that is gradually growing to realize the necessity to preserve the political dialogue and economic ties with Russia. Upcoming elections in key European countries and the US leave hope that the Trans-Atlantic solidarity will cease to be an axiom and Europe will finally regain its own voice.

Thirdly, Russia cannot afford friction and misunderstanding in relations with its closest neighbors and allies – i.e. China, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia. It is not a question of interstate relations, but the necessity to deepen mutual understanding between the elites – be they business, military or youth.

Lastly, 2016 priorities include the strategic goal of stabilizing Greater Eurasia as a guarantee of Russia's survival and prosperity. Cooperation with China, India, Iran, SCO partners and ASEAN countries will help create a system of collective security, build pan-Asian transport and energy infrastructure and ensure formation of the rapidly growing 4-billion Eurasian market, which is of critical importance to Russia.

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