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The Model of Strategic Confrontation Between the USA and Russia in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the military-strategic confrontation between the USA and Russia, with a growing tendency toward conflict escalation in Ukraine. It is demonstrated that the observed paradox – the West's diminishing fear of a “thermonuclear Armageddon” – is driven by the duality of Russia's position after 1991. On the one hand, Russian elites fell under Western influence, yet on the other, they retained the potential to “rise” and restore the country's political sovereignty, leveraging its military-strategic capabilities. As a result, another unique phenomenon emerged: the ambiguity of Russia's “red lines” in foreign policy, as they were either left undefined or continuously shifted. This led to the West becoming accustomed to Russia's excessive caution and failing to “hear” its new signals. The situation is further reinforced and exacerbated by the United States' lack of foreign policy flexibility due to its adherence to a mental model of global dominance, which comprises four key elements: the presumption of America's divine exceptionalism, the doctrine of irreconcilability, the strategy of totality, and the refusal-to-accept-unacceptable-costs syndrome. The effect of power indivisibility, as described by S. Lukes, compounds this model and heightens the insensitivity of the American establishment to the escalation of tensions in Ukraine. The study highlights that the U.S. administration employs two intellectual “legacies” of John Foster Dulles in its strategy: the doctrine of “brinkmanship” and the doctrine of “bearable cost.” Since Russia has not inflicted any tangible damage on the United States, there is no incentive for the latter to abandon Dulles' legacy or to de-escalate the confrontation. The author argues that to change the situation, it is necessary to ensure unacceptable costs for the U.S. in this confrontation. Specific measures to increase the “cost” of American hegemony are discussed, which could shift the focus from unilateral pressure on Russia toward a more favorable environment for constructive negotiations.

Keywords: geopolitics; conflict; nuclear deterrence; economic sanctions; damage

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INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOXES OF MODERN TIMES

During the course of the special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine, the confrontation between Russia and the West has continually escalated through so-called “raising the stakes.” The West, represented by the European powers under the leadership of the United States, is prepared to send contingents of its armed forces to Ukraine, while military aid is being expanded. Strikes on Russian territory with long-range ATACMS missiles resulting in civilian deaths have already been carried out with NATO’s involvement.¹ It is therefore unsurprising that in Russia, as well as in other countries, the issue of using tactical nuclear weapons is being voiced ever more actively. Moreover, this topic was openly discussed by S. Karaganov and V. Putin during the plenary program at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in 2024,² after which Russia adopted a new nuclear doctrine. These discussions have also spilled over into the pages of academic journals [1].

It seems that the political establishments of the countries involved in the conflict have accepted the possibility of a direct nuclear confrontation and are prepared to go all the way.³ All of this brings to the forefront a number of important questions. First: why has the leadership of Western countries lost its fear of Russia, which possesses a nuclear arsenal sufficient to destroy the entire planet? Second: what are the fundamental causes of the escalating military tension between Russia and the countries of the Western alliance? Third: what is the deeper meaning of this escalation, given all the associated risks? And finally, fourth: what line of behavior is advisable for the Russian leadership to adopt under these circumstances?

At the heart of the first three questions lies a kind of paradox. For example, why engage in a direct military confrontation with a state capable of destroying the entire planet — and therefore impossible to defeat in principle? On the surface, the situation appears as if the West has lost its instinct for self-preservation, which contradicts all its traditions and principles. The second question is rooted in the paradoxical combination of Russia’s political accommodation and its impressive military potential: the country’s leadership endlessly promises adequate or symmetrical responses to the West’s aggressive actions, but these promises are almost never backed up by concrete measures. The third question is likewise tied to the lack of a logical connection between the extremely dangerous escalation measures taken by Western countries and their apparent lack of existential reasons for such risks. All these paradoxes require systematic explanation based on economic logic and political theory, which defines the relevance of the topic being raised.

The questions and geopolitical paradoxes outlined above generate a cognitive intrigue that lies in the possibility of constructing a coherent model of the emerging confrontation based on the broadest possible methodological principles. In this regard, the aim of this article is to provide comprehensive answers to the four questions posed, with an emphasis on revisiting the principles of Russia’s confrontation with the collective West — something that, for various reasons, has not yet occurred. The methodological foundation for these answers is based on the previously proposed mental model of U.S. global dominance [2] and S. Lukes’ principle of the indivisibility of power [3]. The novelty of the author’s approach lies in integrating geopolitical facts, the mental attitudes of the parties to the conflict, and economic logic, in order to identify the resulting vector.

THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA: ORIGINS AND CURRENT STATE

To address the first paradox — the emergence of immunity in the West and the United States

¹ URL: <https://www.vesti.ru/article/4023290>

² URL: <https://ya.ru/video/preview/2507429726905085321>

³ The return of Donald Trump to power in the United States in 2025 has somewhat altered the geopolitical configuration; however, most of the statements made by the American president have not yet been implemented systematically, which prevents us from speaking of a definitive shift in U.S. — Russia foreign relations.

against a nuclear-armed power — it is necessary to take a brief historical excursion. Before 1991, the worldview of the U.S. political establishment, as well as that of the world as a whole, categorically rejected direct confrontation with a country possessing thermonuclear weapons. However, the defeat of the USSR in the Cold War and its subsequent breakup into fifteen pseudo-independent states completely changed the geopolitical balance. After that, only Russia inherited the USSR's nuclear arsenal; the other successor states posed no strategic threat to the United States. Having lost 30% of Soviet territory and more than half its population, the Russian Federation still remained far too large, challenging the United States with its sheer size. As such, it continued to represent a potential threat to American hegemony, and, in the view of U.S. authorities, needed to be weakened further, ideally through division into several parts followed by their complete demilitarization. This objective was quite realistic because after 1991, Russia had lost its political sovereignty and de facto — if not entirely, then to a significant degree — was governed externally, from the United States. (In 2022, the process of actively restoring Russia's sovereignty began, though it has not yet been completed.) This situation still exists as something of a “semi-fact”: on the one hand, it is no longer denied; on the other hand, it has not been fully acknowledged. And precisely this state of affairs requires discussion.

In essence, after 1991, a completely unprecedented situation arose, unlike anything in the history of humanity. Ordinarily, any country defeated in war would lose its political sovereignty for a long time: it would usually face not only reparations but also various political and economic restrictions. For example, Germany and Japan, which fell under the patronage of the victorious power (the United States), were forbidden to possess nuclear weapons or to develop certain strategically important sectors of their economies. Germany was divided into two parts, both placed under the protection of other powers: West Ger-

many under U.S. control, East Germany under the USSR (after reunification, the entire country remained under U.S. influence). From that moment on, Germany and Japan became platforms for their new sovereigns, who exercised almost complete control over their politics and economies. Russia experienced roughly the same fate after 1991: its economy was artificially destroyed, almost all knowledge-intensive sectors of industry were eliminated, and its security services and armed forces were demoralized. Such a situation — for a country defeated in the “third world war” (the Cold War) — created an enduring sense of its weakness and safety.

However, the unique aspect of the situation was that the dependent state in question possessed a military-strategic potential unimaginable by historical standards. Moreover, since the Cold War, which the Soviet Union lost, ended without a direct military confrontation, its military arsenal remained intact, operational, and under the control of senior officials, many of whom were unwilling to fully capitulate to the adversary. This circumstance predetermined the *dual nature* of Russia's *position* after 1991: on the one hand, a ruling elite controlled by the West; on the other, the diffuse nature of that elite, with its capacity to transform and at any moment restore the country's political sovereignty, subsequently employing its military power in foreign policy. Neither the United States nor anyone else could directly suppress an elite coup in Russia, due to the threat of triggering a nuclear conflict. A rough historical parallel would be the situation of Germany after World War I, when it was prohibited from uncontrolled military expansion, conducting military exercises, or pursuing militarization of its economy. Despite these restrictions, relying on its advanced industry and the Nazi elite that came to power, the country once again became a military-strategic leader and carried out another wave of military expansion.

In hindsight, it can be argued that the phenomenon of Russia's dual status after the USSR's collapse contained from the very beginning the



seeds of the current course of events, which sooner or later were bound to occur. Moreover, already in the 1990s, Yevgeny Primakov, while serving as Foreign Minister, tried to convey to the West the idea that Russia was a great power experiencing only temporary difficulties [4]. Even then, the first symptoms of a possible change in the situation regarding the restoration of the country's political sovereignty could be observed. However, this does not change the fact that Russian authorities for decades displayed extremely low activity in both international and domestic affairs. In addition, the dire state of the armed forces and the economic situation in the Russian Federation gave no grounds to expect a strong response to the infringement of its foreign policy interests. The 2014 conflict, which resulted in the annexation of Crimea, was the first serious act of defiance by Russia in response to the excessive activism of the United States and NATO in the former Soviet space; however, this event by itself did not signify much. The military-strategic passivity of the leadership in previous years and the vulnerability of the economy in many areas did not give reason to believe that there was any possibility of a robust pushback from a state that had gradually turned into a raw-material appendage of the developed world.

Thus, the American establishment had every reason not to believe in Russia's willingness to respond firmly to its expansionist actions. As for the Russian Federation, the events of 2014 became a kind of final challenge to which it could not fail to react. Had the planned withdrawal of the Russian military base from Sevastopol taken place, followed by the deployment of a U.S. or NATO base on the peninsula, this would have effectively meant Russia's final capitulation, since in such a case its armed forces and nuclear weapons would have been rendered meaningless due to their non-use even in such a dangerous situation. The subsequent eight years, marked by the implementation of the Minsk agreements, also demonstrated Russia's endless concessions and its inability to act decisively.

All of this once again convinced the U.S. administration of the weakness of the Russian authorities. Russia's decisive actions in 2022 did not change this perception: extremely humane conduct of military operations, endless statements about the inevitability of retaliatory strikes against Ukrainian provocations without actually following through, and a willingness to negotiate peace, among other things, only confirmed to American strategists the correctness of their conclusions. Even Russia's use of the "Oreshnik" hypersonic missile in 2024, in response to ATACMS missile attacks on its territory, had an ambiguous character: the time and place of the strike were announced in advance, and its questionable results failed to make the desired impression on the American administration. At the same time, the damage inflicted on Russia over the years of the special military operation has been enormous — in this respect, the United States has confidently outplayed its opponent without any harm to itself, apart from the costs of financing military aid to Ukraine. By shifting the military operation onto neutral territory, and partly even onto Russian soil, the Americans acted strictly in line with their political traditions of indirect engagement [5].

The phenomenon of Russia's dual status after 1991, and its total geopolitical weakness (including military, political, economic, and ideological dimensions), manifested over more than 30 years since the collapse of the USSR, has given rise to another unique phenomenon — the *uncertainty of "red lines."* The foreign policy of any state is built on the principle that there are limits to the tolerance of national authorities toward infringements of their interests by other countries, and crossing these lines threatens open military confrontation. However, throughout all these years, Russia's "red lines" were either not defined at all or were voiced vaguely and ambiguously, leaving room for free interpretation. Moreover, such uncertainty led to the U.S. political establishment in many cases determining these "red lines" themselves, then violating them, and celebrating the lack of serious consequences. However, the

situation is changing — one of S. Lavrov's recent statements highlights the dialectic of foreign policy relations: the West follows the mistaken logic that Russia's "red lines" exist, but will once again be shifted.⁴ Thus, there is a clear absence of, or unwillingness on the part of, the American authorities to understand our country's intentions and plans.

In summary, one can state the following: an unprecedented situation in world history — the defeat of a nuclear power in a hybrid war, followed by its catastrophic economic weakening — forced the U.S. administration to reassess Russia's willingness to defend its strategic interests. It was precisely the geopolitical weakness of the Russian Federation that provoked the paradox of losing fear toward a nuclear state.

The statement of this fact does not imply a value judgment: it would be absurd to place blame on Russia — its weakness was a historical fact and became a tragedy for its peoples. Over 30 years of existence, the country transformed from a superpower into a semi-periphery of the world system, with a tendency toward becoming its periphery. It would have been unreasonable to expect that, during this period, everything would proceed smoothly and that the ruling elites would quickly react to the existential challenges they faced — time was needed, and when that time came, it became a revelation for the American establishment, which still has not abandoned the stereotypes of the 1990s. One might recall Woodrow Wilson's thesis from the time of World War I: "We must finance peace seriously, and whoever pays must *understand* peace and *lead* it."⁵ Today, the United States still wants to lead the world, and it needs to understand it, but apparently, the precedents of the 21st century and the radically changed geopolitical situation do not yet fit within the worldview of its political elite.

⁴ URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/22591299?ysclid=m4cx8zy494898208377>

⁵ America against everyone. Geopolitics, statehood, and global role of the USA: history and the present. M. Sodruzhestvo kultur LLC. 2023. 588 p.

At present, Russia has adopted a new nuclear doctrine and is gradually entering into a more realistic dialogue with its adversary [1]. However, many questions remain unanswered.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY: A MODEL OF GLOBAL HEGEMONY

Let us now attempt to clarify the fundamental reasons for the escalation of military tensions between Russia and the countries of the Western alliance. Why has the United States clung to Russia with a death grip, while its main strategic rival — China — continues to strengthen its position against the backdrop of this destructive escalation? Does America have existential reasons for pursuing such a campaign?

The answer to these questions lies in the mental model of global domination held in the minds of the American establishment. Its essence can be reduced to four principles [2]. First is the *presumption (mythologeme)* of the *God-chosen nature* of the American state and nation, postulating their exceptionalism, righteousness, infallibility, and permissiveness. Second is the *doctrine of intransigence*, which implies political uncompromisingness regarding the maintenance of cultural homogeneity and the elimination of all undesirable social elements. Third is the *stratagem of totality*, presupposing the conduct of war against a strategic adversary by any available means, based on the practice of double standards. Fourth is the *syndrome of rejection of unacceptable costs*, according to which all human and financial losses must be strictly justified, and all special operations must be highly profitable. These principles developed gradually and were reinforced by facts from American history — in the book "America Against Everyone: Geopolitics, Statehood, and the Global Role of the United States: Past and Present",⁶ examples are provided of the practical application of the four elements of the U.S. hegemony model to specific circumstances.

Despite the obvious artificiality of these principles, they retain lasting significance for both

⁶ *ibid.*

American politicians and ordinary citizens, consolidating the nation and serving as a source of its pride and strength. The most important aspect of the hegemony model is the practical counter-productivity of any diplomatic negotiations the United States conducts with its counterparts. For the American establishment, any discussions and disputes with opponents are meaningless, since

it is clear from the outset that they are wrong; moreover, it is foolish to waste resources on conversation when everything can be resolved by force or money. The only argument that can be taken into account is the cost of a decision: only when these costs become patently unacceptable are politicians prepared to abandon their chosen course.

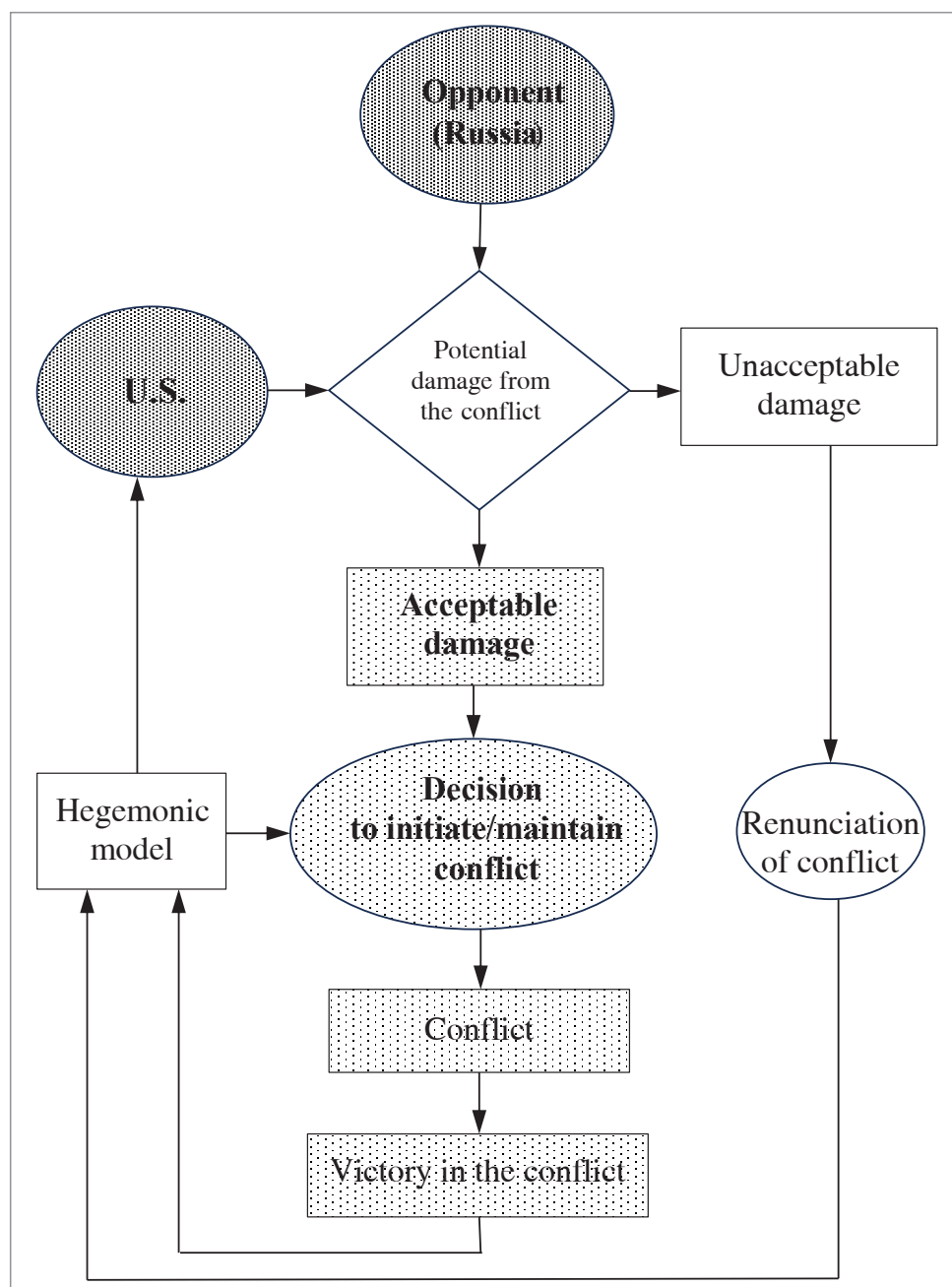


Fig. Algorithm of Political Decision Making in the USA

Source: compiled by the author.

The history of the United States is replete with examples in which the country's authorities escalated situations and engaged in military conflict, but this was always done under conditions of initial and absolutely clear superiority in their favor. A typical example is one of the most dramatic chapters of the country's history — the Civil War between the North and the South. The Northerners initiated this war under conditions of complete dominance: 22 million versus 5.5 million white Southerners, i.e., a ratio of 4:1; the North mobilized 2.1 million soldiers against 880,000 Southerners; for every rifle produced in the South, there were 32 from the North [6, p. 319]. Under such a balance of power, the victory of the North was predetermined, which allowed it to apply the first three provisions of the hegemony model, requiring the unconditional suppression of the adversary.

The decision-making algorithm for starting or continuing a conflict is shown in the *figure*. Thus, everything depends on the scale of the anticipated damage, with entry into a conflict proceeding on the basis of the hegemony model, with all its consequences for the opponent. The evaluation of whether the criteria for acceptable damage are met is carried out continuously, so the initial decision may be adjusted. For example, during the wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, a situation of unacceptable damage was diagnosed at a certain stage, which led the United States to withdraw from further participation in these campaigns.

However, it would appear that the logic shown in the *figure* is universal and applies to virtually all countries — but this is not the case. In one of the author's earlier works [7], the difference in historical decision-making models for Russia and the United States was emphasized: in Russia, political authorities often act on the principle of "at any cost," whereas Americans' low "pain threshold" for losses produces a principle of "minimal bloodshed." Refusing to accept unacceptable damage is a U.S. tradition sanctified

by 250 years of history, and it is therefore not customary to disregard it.

America's hegemony model and its algorithm for political decision-making (see the *figure*) fully explain the phenomenon of the U.S. political establishment's insensitivity to Russia's arguments during the conflict in Ukraine. This will continue until the United States diagnoses the possibility of unacceptable damage to itself from continuing the conflict. In this regard, no strikes — even a nuclear bombardment — on Ukrainian territory will increase the sensitivity of representatives of the American political class, since these do not directly affect them, which is precisely the paradox of the stalemate in the confrontation between Russia and the United States.

It should be added that, for both Russia and the United States, the situation in Ukraine is existential in nature. For Russia, defeat threatens the collapse of its very statehood, while for America it is associated with the loss of global hegemony, which would entail the destruction of the entire previous model of the country's existence. The collapse of U.S. hegemony would mean the end of its monopoly over all political and economic markets, which in turn implies a fall in the profit rate across every sector of the economy (with all the ensuing consequences), as well as the transformation of the country into an ordinary participant in the world economic system — without economic privileges and political bonuses. But then this would be a different America: in such a situation, the American political class is confronted with the phenomenon of the *indivisibility of power*, the essence of which is that any power is supported by its corresponding structure, and it cannot be redistributed but only destroyed and built anew [3]. Any concession of power by the United States would require a complete dismantling of the existing architecture of global power networks, which threatens a total loss of the country's positions. This circumstance does not make the American establishment more receptive to Russia's arguments. As a result, both sides will go to the end.



U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TACTICS: THE POLITICAL LEGACY OF JOHN DULLES

Let us now examine in more detail the question of the deeper meaning behind the escalating conflict — who benefits from it, and how. To do this, it is necessary to start from the fact that escalation is an American tactic of exerting pressure on an adversary, rooted in the political views of John Foster Dulles.

In American politics and diplomacy, the figure of John Foster Dulles holds a special significance. This is due to several factors, among which the deep entrenchment of the Dulles family in the U.S. political establishment plays a considerable role. It is enough to recall that Dulles's grandfather, John Foster, was Secretary of State under President Benjamin Harrison; his uncle, Robert Lansing, was Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson; John Dulles himself served as Secretary of State under Dwight Eisenhower; and his younger brother, Allen Dulles, worked in diplomacy and intelligence, heading the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from 1953 to 1961. Another reason for the role John Dulles plays in American politics lies in his two distinctive intellectual "legacies."

The first of these is known as the *doctrine of brinkmanship* — Dulles is considered one of its authors. According to this doctrine, in international negotiations one should approach as closely as possible to an outcome that is undesirable and, as a rule, catastrophic for both sides, in the expectation that at the last moment the adversary, for reasons of self-preservation, will concede, thereby achieving a double benefit: avoiding catastrophe while gaining unilateral advantages. In diplomacy, the catastrophic outcome is usually war, which in Russian gave rise to the stable phrase "balancing on the brink of war" to describe policies aimed at heightening the military threat. At present, U.S. policy toward Ukraine is a pure reproduction of the doctrine of brinkmanship, with the stakes rising to the point of possible use of thermonuclear weapons of mass destruction. In other words, the first political legacy of John Dulles has not been forgotten and is fully manifest.

The second legacy can be called the *doctrine of an "acceptable price,"* the essence of which is fully captured in his statement: "We want for ourselves and other free nations the maximum means of deterrence at an acceptable price."⁷ This principle requires that all U.S. political campaigns lead to its hegemony and dominance, but not at the cost of excessive losses. In turn, this means that the United States is prepared to make political concessions, but only when the alternative entails unacceptable damage in any form. The country's history is full of such concessions: the refusal to continue the war in Korea, despite the establishment of a communist regime in the northern part of the peninsula; the end of the war in Vietnam, despite the communist victory in the country; withdrawal from Afghanistan, despite the Taliban⁸'s return to power, and so on. There is no doubt that the U.S. authorities are ready to exit the confrontation in Ukraine if the damage from its continuation becomes unacceptably high. But — and this is fundamental! — not before that moment; otherwise, the "Ukrainian game" will continue.

It is easy to see that Dulles's second legacy represents none other than the fourth element of the American domination model — the principle of avoiding unacceptable damage. Thus, Dulles's "acceptable price" doctrine is a political remake of this principle and continues to be fully operational in Ukraine.

History shows that both of Dulles's legacies serve as guiding principles in all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, and it is precisely the presence of this pair of ambivalent principles that provides the American establishment's actions with the necessary balance between aggression and peacefulness. There are currently no apparent reasons to believe that the U.S. political leadership will abandon its foreign policy principles without serious cause. This becomes especially clear when considering that the stakes involve a victory over Russia, which

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ A religious — political organization banned in Russia.

could allow the United States to restart the cycle of its global hegemony.

THE MODEL OF GLOBAL HEGEMONY: BIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

In addition to the economic and geopolitical foundations of the U.S. hegemony model and the resulting logic of behavior, there is also an emotional aspect that cannot be overlooked. The logic of confrontation has deep evolutionary (biological) roots, and to understand them, let us consider several facts from myrmecology (the study of ants).

One of the fundamental laws of sociobiology and ant military strategy states: the more suitable a habitat is for the population's survival and defense, and the better it is equipped with valuable resources, the more intensely and fiercely it is defended [8, p. 66]. We will henceforth call this Law Principle 1: the richer the ecological niche, the fiercer its defense. Another important fact is the following: fertilized queens constantly face the risk of being killed by ants from rival colonies, which leads them to group together in clusters of 10–15 individuals for mutual protection; however, when the offspring mature, they mercilessly kill the surplus queens one by one, dragging them by the legs and stinging them to death, until only the most fertile queen remains [8, p. 73]. From this, two more principles of biological evolution emerge: Principle 2 — excessive competition is unacceptable and is deliberately eliminated up to the establishment of monopoly, and Principle 3 — a maternal structure is destroyed by its own offspring if it yields to a more efficient one. These formulated principles can be projected onto the geopolitical system, resulting in the following picture.

Principle 1: A country that has acquired hegemon status, with its high level of public prosperity and vast geopolitical advantages for its major national businesses, is compelled to aggressively and uncompromisingly maintain its position. This is exactly what the U.S. political establishment

does, employing all available means to preserve its status quo. Principle 2: Countries that create excessive and dangerous competition for the hegemonic state must be eliminated along with the threat they pose. This is precisely the goal pursued by the United States, which imposes all sorts of obstacles to the normal existence and development of Russia, while simultaneously escalating the stakes in Ukraine. Principle 3: In countries that lose the global competition to the hegemon, their own elites and populations often contribute to their downfall in favor of the hegemon [9]. Russia faced this problem at the beginning of the Special Military Operation (SMO), when a broad layer of political opposition and a “fifth column” emerged — not only among the business elite and politicians, but also among ordinary citizens, the academic community, and cultural workers.

All of the above indicates that, alongside the logic of objective events, there is an effect of deep archetypal human behavior in given situations. Thus, the foreign policy strategy and tactics of the U.S. receive reinforcement at the psychological level of their political establishment. At the same time, the lack of unity within the Russian elites and population is also largely predetermined by evolutionary behavioral patterns among different social groups. Of course, in human societies, these original biological behavioral models are significantly weakened, yet they still persist, create a psychological background, and exert certain pressure on decision-makers. Overall, these innate behavioral tendencies confirm the established stereotypes of the U.S. dominance model and provoke its sharp confrontation with Russia. Invisible, deep-rooted biological survival instincts cement the asymmetry in the behavior of the political classes of America and Russia: in the former, an aggressive, uncompromising, and largely irresponsible model of confrontation; in the latter, an overly cautious, prudent, and excessively responsible one. This circumstance may not even be consciously recognized by decision-makers themselves, yet it consistently drives them toward a very specific line of behavior.



CHECKS AND BALANCES: THE POWER OF PLUTOCRACY

Although the political situation in Ukraine today is at an impasse with gradually increasing stakes, it would be wrong to think it is “frozen” and “immovable.” Within the American establishment, there are forces that consider the balance of interests — at least domestically.

To understand their attitude toward a possible nuclear conflict, even beyond the American continent, it is useful to recall that the very form of government in the U.S. is a *plutocracy* — that is, rule by the wealthy or, in other words, the economic elite. Unlike countries with military (militocracy), ideological (theocracy), or bureaucratic (administrative) forms of governance, plutocracy places the interests and preferences of corporate magnates above all else. It is noted that after the U.S. Civil War, plutocracy became firmly established as part of the nation’s “cultural genotype” [6, p. 184].

Since plutocrats hold decisive influence over policy in the U.S., it is reasonable to ask: is it in their interest to unleash a nuclear war? Two distinct questions deserve separate discussion here — those of total and limited nuclear conflict.

To answer them, one should start from an undeniable economic axiom: the primary motive of wealth owners is to preserve and increase their wealth [6, p. 170]. The destruction of hated countries and peoples is not strictly part of this calculus. A total nuclear conflict between the U.S. and Russia, which would lead to planetary devastation, holds no benefit for the American plutocracy — nor does triggering a limited war in Europe. For example, today the U.S. supplies energy resources to Europe, primarily Germany, at prices two to three times above market rates. This means a profit margin of at least 300–500% annually on such operations [10, p. 73]. Undermining the integrity of Germany’s economy through a localized nuclear conflict would lead to Europe rejecting American liquefied natural gas and deprive U.S. plutocrats of these superprofits. Such a price for “taming” Russia appears

excessive rather than “tolerable,” as John Dulles “bequeathed.”

This passage does not exhaust the political logic of plutocracy — historical analogies are also relevant. For instance, history clearly demonstrates a pattern: lost external wars lead to revolutions and massive civil wars [6, p. 297]. The deeper and harsher the U.S. defeat in the proxy war in Ukraine, the greater the social protest and chaos within the country will be. The use of nuclear weapons only increases the risk of this outcome — all amid a social crisis in America marked by widespread impoverishment and intensifying elite and counter-elite conflicts within the plutocracy. This situation is well captured by Peter Turchin’s rule: “Nothing affects the collective mind of the ruling class better than a double existential threat — when the subjugated population expresses dissatisfaction and when geopolitical rivals press hard” [6, p. 295]. Indeed, mistakes in such circumstances carry dire consequences, primarily for the elites themselves. Most likely, the current situation will lead to a reasonable consensus regarding the confrontation in Ukraine.

The rise of Donald Trump to power in the United States in 2025 will likely contribute to a long-term search for conditions to reach a deal on Ukraine. This does not necessarily mean that the strategy and tactics of his administration will differ fundamentally from those under Joe Biden. However, a stronger focus on profit and cost reduction may broaden the range of possible solutions. Pressure and “balancing on the brink” by the U.S. will continue, but as a result, a final “price of the deal” may emerge, allowing progress to be made from the current deadlock.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis reveals a highly asymmetrical geopolitical situation in the confrontation between the United States and Russia. In fact, while America delivers very sensitive blows to Russia without suffering any damage itself, our country is engaged in active hostilities — including

on both new and old territories. The economy of border regions has significantly declined and, apparently, will continue to weaken. International sanctions have caused colossal trade and production problems, many of which may only be resolved in the long term. Russia's financial and human losses remain unknown but are undoubtedly substantial. All this happens against the backdrop of zero damage to the U.S.: their arms supplies to Ukraine appear more like disposal than any weakening of military potential, and financial aid, given America's currency hegemony through dollar printing, is not overly burdensome. Thus, our country is currently losing the geopolitical confrontation with America, bearing a far heavier burden of costs — material, human, and financial — while the U.S. feels no significant discomfort from the ongoing conflict. If we strive to win this war and avoid a full-scale nuclear conflict, a change in confrontation tactics is imperative.

The rise to power of Trump signals another swing toward plutocracy in U.S. foreign affairs, but this alone is insufficient to resolve the problem in Ukraine. As a representative of plutocracy, Trump must clearly see the unacceptable losses entailed by continuing the campaign against Russia, and preferably the benefits of ending the active phase of confrontation. Here, the necessity of corresponding initiatives from Russia becomes evident.

In this context, it is legitimate to pose the fourth question raised at the start of the article: what should Russia do under the evolving circumstances?

As noted above, it is advisable for Russia to pursue an ambivalent policy regarding the escalation of unacceptable damage for the U.S. while simultaneously creating potential benefits for them. This leads us into a zone of highly speculative hypotheses and proposals, so we will briefly touch upon possible Russian solutions, fully aware of their controversial nature.

To demonstrate the seriousness of its intentions, sooner or later Russia will have to take

unpopular measures, which may involve various courses of action:

1. *Partial disruption of global infrastructure.* For example, in 2023, due to unintended actions by the Chinese vessel Newnew Polar Bear in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Estonia, the Balticconnector⁹ gas pipeline was damaged. In 2024, damage was recorded to the C-Lion1 submarine communication cable between Finland and Germany.¹⁰ It is unsurprising that Washington suspects Moscow of potentially conducting sabotage operations aimed at disabling critical parts of the global communications infrastructure. However, until now Russia has excluded this path for itself. Apparently, the time is coming when such operations should not only become an integral part of Russia's special military operation policy but also be scaled up significantly so that the United States and European countries can feel the costs associated with the confrontation in Ukraine.

2. *Blocking maritime trade routes.* In 2024, actions by the Houthis in the Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait led to a gradual curtailment of

navigation there.¹¹ The Houthis are under the patronage of Iran, with which Russia cooperates on many fronts, so there is no obstacle to supplying them with modern weapons to enhance their capabilities and effectively paralyze global trade in the region. Dissatisfaction with this fact could become a signal for the U.S. and EU countries to reconsider their position on Ukraine. It is also worth noting that accidents sometimes occur in the Red Sea: in 2021, the tanker Ever Given ran aground and blocked the Suez Canal, with the cost of unblocking operations estimated at \$ 9.6 billion per day; similar blockages happened in 2022 due to the tanker Affinity V, and again in 2023 because of the dry cargo ship Xin Hai Tong.¹² Such block-

⁹ URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/12/08/2024/66ba08b99a7947bc6483fc9>

¹⁰ URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/18/11/2024/673b4a109a7947637be77c0a?ysclid=m4bi6oplwe428930601>

¹¹ URL: https://www.ng.ru/world/2024-01-16/1_8923_redsea.html

¹² URL: <https://oilcapital.ru/news/2023-05-25/v-suetskom-kanale-vnov-chp-2937680>



ages could be artificially reproduced, and Russia has all the means to do so. A skillful alternation of Houthi actions and “friendly” tankers could block this vital trade route for a prolonged period.

3. *Strikes on decision-making centers in Ukraine.* Another permissible tool to deter the aggressive stance of the American establishment and its allies could be devastating strikes on decision-making points in Ukraine, with an emphasis on causing maximum damage to foreign advisors and military personnel. It is not excluded that Russia may have to strike the territory of a NATO country supplying weapons to Ukraine. Naturally, such actions will provoke mass protests but would overall have a sobering effect on Western political elites.

4. *Complete ban on the supply of strategic raw materials to unfriendly countries.* Another potentially painful gap for the U.S. is the import of strategic goods from Russia. For example, in both 2022 and 2023, Russia actively supplied America with pearls, precious stones, coins, mineral fertilizers, fuels, oils, distillation products, platinum group metals, aluminum, and uranium,¹³ thereby supporting its energy and electronics sectors during the active phase of the special military operation. In 2024, Russia introduced restrictions on the export of enriched uranium to the U.S. but made exceptions for shipments under one-time licenses issued by the Federal service for technical and export control.¹⁴ While there may be some economic rationale behind such decisions, they clearly contradict the war regime and reduce the damage inflicted on the United States, so Washington is unlikely to respond to any signals.

5. *Expropriation of foreign companies' assets on Russian territory.* Although the process of acquiring foreign companies leaving Russia continued in 2024, it appears excessively liberal. Since 2022, transactions involving the sale of Russian assets belonging to residents of unfriendly countries require approval by a government commission,

and the asset's value is determined by independent appraisal. In 2024, the minimum discount that foreign owners must offer Russian buyers increased from 50% to 60%, and the size of the “voluntary contribution” to the budget rose from 15% to 35% of the market value of the asset. While these measures reduce the burden on local business, they are clearly insufficient in the current conditions. For example, the French company Danone, which left Russia in 2024, sold its business to the Russian company Vamin R for 17.7 billion rubles, despite its valuation being approximately 80 billion rubles — that is, 4.5 times below market value.¹⁵ However, nothing prevents Russia from fully expropriating such assets — in the absence of this, buyouts appear as a sign of weakness and reduce investment resources for domestic entrepreneurs who could otherwise develop the local economy.

6. *Developing business proposals for the U.S. in the event of conflict resolution.* As noted above, measures to increase the sensitivity of the American establishment should include not only direct damage but also potential incentives. This topic warrants separate, in-depth research, but already one promising direction can be identified: Arctic development in cooperation with the United States. For example, current estimates suggest that cargo traffic along the Northern Sea Route is expected to increase eightyfold from 2010 to 2024 — from 1 million to 80 million tons.¹⁶ The Arctic is claimed not only by Russia and the U.S., but also by China, allowing us to skillfully leverage competing interests among these partners. Russia could offer the Americans various incentives: quotas for passage through the Northern Sea Route, access to northern Russian ports, opportunities for American capital participation in specific Arctic projects, and so forth. These would constitute a significant motivation for the U.S. to reconsider its support for Ukraine in favor of a strategically important economic partnership.

Without further elaboration, it should be emphasized that the purpose of all the proposed actions is

¹³ URL: https://tsargrad.tv/articles/russkij-uran-dlja-ukrainskih-snarjadov-vskrylas-neprigladnaja-tajna-torgovli-s-ssha-2_857662?utm_referrer=https%3a%2f%2fya.ru%2f

¹⁴ URL: <https://vz.ru/economy/2024/11/16/1298314.html?ysclid=m4bkfrfxna538161307>

¹⁵ URL: <https://journal.tinkoff.ru/news/foreign-business-sale/?ysclid=m52d3zi9om936178046>

¹⁶ URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/8679505?ysclid=m4bljliwbu471021957>

at least to partially shift the burden currently borne by Russia onto Western — and primarily American — assets. Otherwise, the U.S. will neither relinquish its claims regarding Ukraine

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In conclusion, it is worth reflecting on the relevance and demand for the proposed recommendations. Currently, the scholarly literature actively debates the phenomenon of the decline of U.S. hegemony and its consequences. A widely held view is that the era of U.S. geopolitical monopoly is ending, giving way to an oligopoly characterized by the rising power of China and the BRICS organization — which, according to available estimates, is expected to become the leading force in the G20 by the late 2030s — as well as the concept of Afrocentrism, embraced by many countries (e.g., South Africa) as a theoretical foundation in their efforts toward decolonization [11]. In this context, some argue that U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration's first term ("Trump Doctrine") represented a withdrawal from global leadership in favor of reactive populism [12].

Conversely, some analysts use the example of Argentina to demonstrate that Trump, contrary to popular belief, did not weaken U.S. hegemony in Latin America but rather strengthened it by relying on traditional American "dollar diplomacy" tools [13]. Other researchers point out that the so-called "realpolitik" succeeding liberal imperialism tends to provoke proxy wars without creating new institutions, practices, or norms to mitigate their consequences, potentially becoming a new source of international disorder [14]. Building on this idea, leading political scientists highlight the inability of the successive Trump and Biden administrations to abandon the goal of U.S. supremacy, resulting in a state of "dominance without hegemony," where America plays an increasingly dysfunctional role — its foreign policy has shifted from a mid-20th-century regime of "legitimate defense" to an early 21st-century regime of "protective racketeering" [15].

The literature identifies three potential paths for the U.S. to preserve its hegemony: 1) defensive protectionism; 2) fragmentation of the international system; and 3) launching a new wave of innovation ("rejuvenation"). However, since China demonstrates both the capability and willingness to become the technological leader, the third option appears doubtful, making the first two more likely — and these carry the risk of war over control of technology and its ownership [16]. Nevertheless, some authors emphasize China's mistakes related to its pursuit of dominance, which alarms its neighbors, while the U.S. retains the experience of building extensive networks of influence [17].

The identified trends and factors in the restructuring of the global economic system create a favorable environment for more active Russian actions in the conflict in Ukraine. For example, there is an opinion that the main reason for the sharp deterioration in relations between Moscow and Washington was Russia's new role in addressing critical global issues, which laid the foundation for effective strategic bargaining [18]. Although some publications note that in the past decade of confrontation between the U.S. and Russia, Russia's actions have largely been forced, reactive responses to hostile moves by the hegemon [19]. In other words, it is emphasized that Russia lost strategic initiative at the outset of the conflict.

At the same time, there are prerequisites for active bargaining between Russia and America. For instance, some experts argue that the Arctic is a zone of strategic interest for all states, and severing ties with Russia beyond the Arctic Circle for the U.S. and NATO countries is unjustified; it not only increases the risk of escalation in the geopolitical conflict but also hinders progress on climate change mitigation [20]. According to Russian analysts, the Northern Sea Route project, on the contrary, could become a powerful stimulus for Russian-American economic cooperation¹⁷.

¹⁷ Russia – U.S. relations after the "reset": on the way to a new agenda. A view from Russia. Report by Russian participants of the Working group on the future of Russian – American relations. M.: Valdai; 2011. 48 p.



Meanwhile, Chinese expert Gu Fengli rightly points out that the conflict in Ukraine is part of a long-prepared hybrid war aimed at preserving U.S. hegemony, and until that goal is achieved, the opponent will not allow Russia to easily “break free,” which is a key factor in the continuation of the confrontation and rising stakes [21]. It is suggested that the current events are a direct continuation of the Cold War, which immediately transitioned into a new phase [22]. At the same time, analysts stress that Russia and the U.S. find themselves in the same civilizational boat—they are losing, and will continue to lose, their relative weight in the global economy and politics¹⁸.

One study correctly notes that the way for the U.S. to return to a historical norm of behavior involves increasing the country’s foreign policy costs and raising the price of maintaining the American empire. However, a deterrence measure such as the last warning signal in the form of a ground detonation of a super-large nuclear warhead (over 50 megatons) seems unjustified [1]. A detonation on Russian territory (for example, at Malaya Zemlya) would only damage Russia itself, but would not affect the U.S.—in fact, it would be a costly yet ineffective demonstration shot.

All these factors indicate that both Russia and the U.S. are in an extremely precarious situation, which will only worsen due to mutual confrontation. In this context, the recognition of the clear and painful damage that could be inflicted on the U.S. if the conflict in Ukraine continues—alongside potential benefits from its resolution—could serve as a serious motive for the American establishment to abandon the escalation strategy.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the military-strategic confrontation between the United States and Russia allows us to outline several important theses that should serve as a basis for contemporary political analysis. First and foremost is the understanding of the West’s loss of fear regard-

ing a thermonuclear Armageddon, which could occur if control over the situation in Ukraine is lost. This is connected to a unique phenomenon in the history of human civilization—the *duality of Russia’s position* after 1991, when its ruling elites were, on one hand, under Western influence, but on the other hand, their ambiguity and uncertainty contained the potential to “rise up” and restore the country’s political sovereignty, relying on its military-strategic capabilities, including its nuclear arsenal. This situation gave rise to another unique phenomenon—the *uncertainty of Russia’s “red lines”* in foreign policy, which were either unspoken or constantly shifted. Although Russia has begun to change its policy in this regard, the West has already become accustomed to its excessive caution and no longer hears these new signals.

The United States’ lack of flexibility in responding to Russia’s statements and actions is largely tied to its mental model of global dominance, which includes four elements: the presumption of the American state’s divine chosenness, the doctrine of irreconcilability, the stratagem of totality, and the syndrome of refusal to accept unacceptable costs. The indivisibility effect of power compounds this model and exacerbates the American establishment’s insensitivity to the escalating tensions in Ukraine.

At the same time, the U.S. administration employs two distinct “legacies” of John Dulles in its tactics: the doctrine of “balancing on the edge” and the doctrine of the “tolerable price.” Since Russia has so far caused no significant damage to the United States, the American authorities have no reason to abandon these political principles. However, the return of Donald Trump to power in the U.S. in 2025 signals a strengthening of plutocratic principles in government and creates conditions for a deal on Ukraine—one that will require inflicting unacceptable damage on America.

For this the following measures are proposed: partial destruction of global infrastructure; blockade of maritime trade routes; strikes on decision-making centers in Ukraine; a complete

¹⁸ *ibid.*

ban on the supply of strategic raw materials to unfriendly countries; expropriation of assets belonging to foreign companies from hostile states located on Russian territory; and the development of business proposals for the U.S. in the event of conflict resolution. These measures should be implemented by the Government of the Russian Federation, relying on its existing administrative apparatus. Ideally, all major actions should be completed by the end of 2025

and begin to yield results within that timeframe. Without going into details, it can be asserted that the country's highest authorities possess the necessary forces, resources, and means for this; however, their effective use requires generating creative and largely unconventional management decisions. Carrying out these actions will help shift away from unilateral strikes against Russia and create a more favorable environment for constructive negotiations.

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