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Important Features of the Perception of Russia in the Modern American Elite

Abstract: The article examines some of the key issues that most directly affect the prevailing attitude towards Russia in the United States. In particular, it is argued that the sharpness of contradictions in relations with Russia is largely due to the fact that the American elite has proved largely unable to recognize its own assertions about the “final collapse” and weakening of Russia and perceive it not as a “departing nature”, but as a global player who has regained his strength on the political arena. In this, the Americans were far from China, which even in the “darkest” period of the Russian turmoil was convinced that Russia will return and influence the development of international relations in the most decisive way.

Keywords: *International relations, Russia, USA, China, crisis, influence, sanctions, conflicts, political mistakes*

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ВАЖНЫЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ ВОСПРИЯТИЯ РОССИИ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ АМЕРИКАНСКОЙ ЭЛИТЕ

Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются некоторые ключевые вопросы, самым непосредственным образом влияющие на господствующее в США отношение к России. В частности, утверждается, что острота противоречий в отношениях с Россией во многом вызвана тем, что американская элита оказалась во мно-

гом неспособной признать собственные заблуждения относительно «окончательного распада» и ослабления России и воспринимать ее не как «уходящую натуру», а как восстановившего свои силы глобального игрока на политической арене. В этом американцы оказались далеки от Китая, который даже в самый «темный» период российской смуты был убежден в том, что Россия вернется и будет влиять на развитие международных отношений самым решительным образом.

Ключевые слова: *Международные отношения, Россия, США, Китай, кризис, влияние, санкции, конфликты, политические ошибки*

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Here in Russia, we often ask an acute question – why are the major part of American and wider Western political elites, diplomats, media and scientific think tanks almost unanimous in their assessments of the current Russia and the prospects for its development. They constantly underline the following features: there is no democracy in the country, weak and going down economy, total corruption criminal society and the foreign policy that is aggressive and unacceptable. We can find many possible ways to answer this question – the most popular is that American view on Russia is connected with the struggle for world domination. Another explanation sounds like this – American ruling circles dislike and distrust Russian ruling elite that allows itself a lot of things that Americans do not like, especially when it conducts an increasingly independent policy without regard to the United States.

As for me, I'm closer to another point of view – extremely negative approach to Russia is not new in principle, is coming to us from the ancient history and based on the wish of European societies to destroy Russia, not to see any more on the map its vast territories

with a different culture from them. The negative propaganda, hostile to Russia clichés created in the West over the past decades are largely based on this phenomenon and also on the fact that the so-called victory in the Cold War gave rise to the feeling that in the XXI century – the old goal of destroying Russia is achievable then before – you only need to choose the right policy to finally end Russia and erase it from the world political scene.

The key features of America's policy towards Russia are total pressure in all spheres, to make Russia back down and apologize and repent all the time. They believe that this is how they will succeed. Numerous and very well-known American analytical centers, from Stratfor to the Brookings Institution, work on this purpose and show an amazing unity of views regarding Russia. What they offer is recorded in official American documents. For example in the United States official doctrine — the «National Security Strategy», adopted in December 2017. A significant part of it is devoted to threats from China, but a lot has been said about Russia, and in the most negative way. Russia allegedly «continues to intimidate its neighbors with threatening behavior» and «uses subversive measures to weaken America's trust in Europe»¹.

Such assessments were prepared in the depths of the American expert community, which is extremely even in comparison with American civil society is negative towards Moscow. The vast majority of the current assessments of modern Russia seem to be made under a carbon copy and completely follow the logic of the American political elites.

It should be noted that this approach from 2017 National Security Strategy and Trump administration is almost unchanged now in Biden era. New official documents about Russia are still the same. If we take some parts from the new official American document about Russia made by the US Congressional Research Service, we quickly make sure of this. In this report published under the title «Russia: domestic politics and economics» we can see that U.S. policy toward Russia includes «support for democracy and civil society, sanctions related to human rights, and diplomacy»². This key phrase at the very beginning of the report gives a clear signal: interference in the internal affairs of Russia will be the core of American policy, and diplomacy, as frankly stated, will only be an auxiliary tool.

But why is the US expert community so conservative and so negative about Russia? Apparently, American scholars and political analysts reflect the anti-Russian opinion of the management of the foundations and various influential benefactors who ensure their existence. It makes no sense to dwell on the part of the report prepared by so-called research foundation as Freedom House (by the way, the most voluminous) that describes the violation of human rights in Russia. The examples are still the same, the charges are canonized, the «victims of the regime» have long been known to everyone. The main task of annual reports is to fix in the minds of congressmen what kind of country they are dealing with. If you trust the experts of the Congress and Freedom House, then there is probably no more gloomy country in the world than Russia. The last section in the human rights chapter is marked as follows: «Murders and poisonings»... canonized, «victims of the regime»³. With the help of such reports and presentations that form in fact dirty propaganda, that affects not only the world opinion but form in American establishment views and ideas extremely negative and suspicious of Russia.

There are multiple examples of fake news on Russia. We can see that the experts of the influential American Institute for National Strategic Studies argue that: «the relations of the United States and the West with Russia remain under threat», as «Russia is increasingly asserting itself on the world stage» or «Russia is increasingly threatening others and acting outside its borders. Then they usually assert that time is not on Russia's side...»⁴.

Experts from another think tank this time Stratfor write in one of their reports that «Russia is waging an absolutely losing hybrid war against the West»⁵. The logic of their reasoning goes something like this: Russia is weak and aggressive, and aggressive because it is weak. They note that «as tensions between Russia and the West have grown in recent years, Moscow has increasingly resorted to hybrid warfare to gain and maintain a foothold in the struggle for power and influence, while since its resurgence as a regional power, Russia no longer boasts the significant conventional forces needed to confront NATO and regain the land it lost in the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Russia has had to turn to other means to maximize its advantages and minimize its weaknesses, as well as find new ways to pay for a century-long war with the West»⁶.

Such an understanding of Russia and its supposedly insignificant capabilities leads to the fact that the ruling American circles have a dangerous temptation to actively oppose Russia in all directions, to form a sanctions regime around it in the hope of achieving its final destruction. It is quite obvious that they are not satisfied with the political initiatives of Russia, which they consistently oppose, and the deepening of its ties with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region and, first of all, with China, they disrupt the contracts of Russian technology companies in the military-technical sphere as much as they can, conduct an information war, showing Russia as an aggressive, almost totalitarian power that cannot be trusted. In the post-Soviet space, they form centers of tension, from which, according to their ideas, new threats to Russia will come.

It should be noted that, Americans from the beginnings of the 90th worked out a tradition of not taking Russia's policy in Asia seriously at all. Washington believed that after the collapse of the USSR, Russia found itself somewhere on the periphery of Asia and had no military, economic, or political opportunities to threaten the American positions. But with the military strengthening of Russia, the rapprochement of Moscow and Beijing, and aggravation of relations between Beijing and Washington, this long time approach gradually changed. They were forced to admit, that Russia has become a prominent player. Such a new approach one can see in various American texts and studies on the general situation in the Asia-Pacific region. But even there they claim that Russia as the regional player is rather not independent, but rather dependent from China.

As an example – Philip Davidson, the commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, in his report to the US Congress, said that Russia's policy in the Indo-Pacific zone causes him concern. «Moscow, – he said, – regularly plays the role of spoiler, seeking to undermine U.S. interests and impose additional costs on the United States and our allies whenever and wherever possible». The American admiral apparently used the word «spoiler» with the desire to show that Russia acts as a «second number» in the region – it does not attack itself, but its actions cause damage to Washington. The second meaning of the word «spoiler» in its text is the emphasis on Moscow's subordinate role in relation to China. In his vision, Russia is closely linked to China and acts together with it. «Our adversaries,

– he pointed out, – are pursuing their goals in the gray zone between peace and war. China and Russia use fear and coercion, all elements of national power, to redefine the existing international order, without resorting to armed conflict»⁷.

In his report, the American admiral reproduced the view of Russia's policy in the Asia-Pacific region, which is quite common in the United States today. He did not delve into the nuances of Russian-Chinese relations, and stated the real danger from these two states. Exactly the same are approaches of Western and, above all, American analysts to Russia's policy in Asia and in the world. From their point of view, whether Russia will participate in the formation of the Indo-Pacific region or not, in the current international situation, it is considered as a direct enemy and will remain under constant pressure from the United States and the collective West, aimed at isolating Russia, weakening it, creating prerequisites for an internal explosion. Individual calls to take a more realistic look at what is happening in Russia and at its real opportunities in the international arena are almost unheard of, especially after the events of 2014.

Prior to this, proposals on the desirability of strengthening ties with Russia some experts recommend that the ruling circles of America should «ignore the undemocratic phenomena in Russia, so as not to destroy Russian-American relations and not to push Moscow to Beijing. Based on this vital American interest and understanding that Washington's influence on Russia's slow democratic transformation is limited, they demand that the United States should not allow the promotion of democracy to become the dominant force in its approach to Russia»⁸.

Today, these quite sensible proposals made back in 2011 look like a kind of anachronism. The trend is completely different, once again approaches of the majority of the American expert community to Russia, treats Moscow and its policies with even less reverence than the American admiral. At least he described Russia as a «spoiler», as a junior partner of China, which was fundamentally wrong. But others do not even consider Russia a «spoiler» and simply do not notice its interests and policies. If you look at the reports of numerous and very famous American analytical centers from Stratfor to the Brookings Institution, you can find a surprising unity of views on Russia, which reminds me of the old Soviet times.

The influential American Institute for National Strategic Studies, which, according to its advertising, «provides strategic support to the Secretary of Defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Military Command, as well as interacts with the broader national security community in the defense service», represented by experts — Peter Zvak and Marie-Charlotte Pierre — outlined their vision of the situation in Russia. They believe that «the relations of the United States and the West with Russia remain under threat, as «Russia is increasingly asserting itself on the world stage». From the point of view of Zvak and Charlotte Piere this is a serious problem for US. They clearly condemn this tendency. Russia, in their opinion, is still guided by a worldview based on existential threats: real, imaginary and far-fetched. As a vast Eurasian nation Russia is divided into 11 time zones and facing serious demographic and economic challenges. They recognize that Russia faces numerous security dilemmas at home and along its vulnerable and sprawling borders. But they note that in its politics, it shows a reactive xenophobia stemming from a long history of destructive war and invasion along much of its borders, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Russia is increasingly threatening others and acting outside its borders. But time is not on Russia's side, as it has engaged in a grueling battle over the status quo, which includes an unnecessary confrontation with the West, numerous unresolved military commitments, an only partially diversified economy weakened by sanctions, and looming domestic tensions. In addition, it directly borders on China, which is gaining strength, experts say⁹.

I specifically quoted the text from the work of American experts in such detail, since this short segment contains almost all the Western myths about Russia. I must say that all these myths about Russia and the politics of poor, aggressive and corrupt country when they put together make a strange impression. It cannot be said that they are all false. However, when some ideas correspond to reality, they can immediately disappear into a sea of outright «fake», and this in principle does not change anything. Moreover, negative assessments are so absolutized that they correspond little to reality. Russia really has a huge number of problems, we do not need to invent

them, we just need to deal more deeply and substantively with what is happening in the country now.

In general, the idea that Russia is already a «passing nature», «a weakening economy and political culture that stifles business and civil initiative», is clearly expressed by analysts from Chatham House. In the special report «The Russian Challenge»¹⁰, they try to explain that all Moscow actions on the international arena are only rearguard actions in the past of a great vast empire. They also note that this understanding of Russia, is accepted by most American analysts, who are convinced themselves and convince everyone that they are dealing with «a huge, nuclear-armed and declining enemy»¹¹.

Russia, in their opinion — is a state that barely keeps afloat and can collapse at any moment under the weight of internal problems, as it was with the USSR. The tone here is set again by Stratfor think tank, whose employees predict that «even before the split of Russia, Moscow's influence will significantly weaken, which, in turn, will create a space with semi-autonomous regions. «We expect that Moscow's authority will significantly weaken, and this will lead to the formal and informal fragmentation of Russia, so it is unlikely to survive in its current form», – they write¹².

It is also surprising that they are not convinced by any arguments about the positive changes taking place in the country. Even the huge achievements in the military sphere, in the standard of living of people, in medicine and in the construction of infrastructure, even the fact that Russia ranks fifth in the world in nominal GDP, cannot shake their views. I still remember a conversation with an American participant at the South China Sea conference in Hanoi in 2016. She was convinced that in Russia, in terms of access to information, the same conditions remained as in the USSR. No arguments that anyone can find out the opinion of Western politicians via the Internet, can watch CNN or even conservative Fox News, could not convince her. And this is not surprising, because, when in 2012 sociologists of one of the oldest American universities—the College of William and Mary (College of William and Mary) in order to find out the views of the American scientific and political elite on Russia conducted a special survey it witnessed a catastrophically low interest in our country. Only 3% of university researchers surveyed considered Russia and the surrounding territories of the former USSR to

be a region of strategic importance to the United States. The same 3% confirmed the preservation of the strategic importance of Russia and the CIS countries for America in 20 years. This conclusion was not agreed by the representatives of the political elite, who showed even greater skepticism in their assessments of Russia. In their opinion, both in 2012 and in 20 years, «Russia will retain zero value for American foreign policy»¹³.

In this regard, in China, the situation with attitude to Russia, its internal and external policy was absolutely the opposite. They have always followed everything that happens in Russia with great attention and interest, both in scientific and party circles. At the same time, even in the most difficult 90s, when it really seemed that Russia as a great power would never rise again, in the expert community of China there were completely different ideas about our country in comparison with US, much more in line with reality. Yes, there were also extremely pessimistic forecasts, but they did not determine the general mood. Back in 1995 a prominent scholar like Gu Xue noted, «In Russia, Beijing sees a paralyzed, but not tamed, great power. Despite the decline of the Soviet Empire, China recognizes its will and ability to become a world power again, and not a second-rank one»¹⁴.

As we can see China and its leadership never overestimated the Russian difficulties, understood the inevitability of Russia's return to the world stage and was ready to accept it. In America, they were not ready for this. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why today we are talking about the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, and not about the Russian-American one.

A significant share of the blame for this situation lies with the American expert community with its stable anti-Russian-mythological approach. It is possible that one of the reasons for this is the unwillingness to recognize the fact that Russia in its development overturned almost all the forecasts of American experts of the 90s. They then confidently predicted extinction, mass emigration, degradation of population, national conflicts, the loss of new territories and the path to self-disintegration. To say that they made a mistake in their calculations is «not their method». They are not mistaken, they cannot be mistaken and therefore they continue to say that everything in Russia rests on the power of one person — President V. Putin, and after his departure, everything can change. The country

can either collapse or join the United States. Such spells are also pleasant to the American political elite, as they still want Russia to really disintegrate and disappear from the world political scene.

All these confident conclusions and numerous forecasts of respected analysts actively spread in the ruling elite of the United States gives rise to empty hopes that the beautiful past can still be returned. Washington has not forgotten how their representatives, including those from the so-called expert community, sat in the offices of the former leaders of the USSR on the Old Square in Moscow, and they can not accept that all this has passed and everything has changed dramatically.

In the United States, many are seriously counting on a new great collapse of Russia, following the example of the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union. All these «empty hopes» are based on the collapse of the USSR and the belief that the same miracle will happen to Russia. They do not even want to notice that Russia and the USSR are fundamentally different states. In the USSR, Russians were less than 50% of the population, and in Russia they are more than 80%, besides, there are no republics that have the right to secede from the federation. In addition, Russia is much more financially stable, since in the USSR huge funds were spent on stabilizing the situation in Central Asia and on supporting the agriculture of Georgia and Ukraine. Russia has somewhat decreased geographically, but has retained its main mineral deposits, scientific schools, industrial enterprises, and agricultural land. All this passes by the American experts.

They are waiting for shocks and the collapse of Russia, trying to accelerate this process as much as possible. Their «empty efforts», if we are talking about practical politics, actually go against American interests, as they form a real barrier to at least some positive changes. Hoping for a miraculous return to the past, the ruling American elite and the collective West associated with them, maintain a strategy aimed at weakening Russia, at strengthening anti-Russian sanctions. In this way, and this is what most experts promise, they will allegedly be able to cause shocks, change the regime, and achieve Russia's withdrawal from the world political scene. It turns out that false ideas give new strength and new meanings for the continuation of the anti-Russian policy.

Moreover, the opinions of leading experts on Russia are shared by the ruling circles, the political core of both leading American political parties, and key information resources and agencies. We can say that the American ruling class is united in its rejection of modern Russia. No one among them has no desire to objectively analyze why Russia, which in the early 90s was debating in ruling elite whether Moscow was America's closest partner or already its closest ally, now stay on the other, opposite front line. All this proves once again that this hostility and distrust towards Moscow is deep inside ruling class of America will be long-lasting and continuous.

It is obvious that the anti-Russian course of America will be implemented regardless of how Russia will counteract the American plans. Oleg Arin well known scholar on international relations in Asia and Pacific wrote about this fact in 2001, pointing out that «in the strategic plan for the United States, it does not matter which regime in Russia: communist or capitalist. Russia is a threat to them in any case»¹⁵.

As we can see there is something existential in this approach of the Americans to Russia, something like the confrontation between ancient Rome and Carthagen, and the Americans, of course, see themselves as a modern likeness of ancient Rome.

The experience of Carthagen shows that waiting and doing nothing, sitting quietly and not moving anywhere, hoping that the main enemy will forget about Russia is a wrong strategy, which is critical for national survival. Therefore, Moscow should never passively observe how and in what direction the transformation of Asia will take place, how the Americans will achieve their goals step by step through pressure and threats. Only an active independent policy, the search for new friends and the preservation of old ones, the strict defense of their own interests can guarantee that ancient Rome in modern conditions will not be able to crush the new Carthagen.

I am sure that in the confrontation with the United States, Russia can and should act together with China, which, for all its global goals, is objectively interested in strengthening relations with Russia, since it is also the object of American pressure and sanctions. In Moscow, where there are supporters and opponents of the Russian-Chinese rapprochement, however, as in Beijing, it is very important to maintain a broad view of the situation both in the Asia-Pacific re-

gion and the Indo Pacific, and in the world. Objectively, both Russia and China have much more that unites them than separates them. First of all, it is worth noting a common view of the global situation, the need to resist American pressure, threats and sanctions, significant joint economic projects, especially in the field of oil and gas transportation, which form the resource base of China's support.

At the same time, it is obvious that the Americans will make every effort to prevent further Russian-Chinese rapprochement. They did not believe in the reality of the Russian-Chinese alliance for a long time, and now it is possible that with various promises and meaningless concessions, such as Donald Trump's statements that it is necessary to return Russia to the «seven», they will try to separate their two main opponents, and then isolate and destroy them separately. Almost certainly, they will play on the unconscious fears of China's neighbors that they spread with their mass media false dangers of Chinese expansion. On the basis of such propaganda, they will try to present themselves as best friends and allies and will pretend to be ready to restore mutual relations with Russia. But fortunately, Russia is well aware of the true plans of the United States. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov wrote in his article, «The United States» does not hide its desire to discord Moscow and Beijing, to upset and undermine the multilateral associations and regional integration structures developing outside of American control in Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific region»¹⁶.

I believe that without recognizing the reality of a new Russia with Crimea and with global interests by the USA and collective West and its experts, it is simply not serious to talk about some new detente. Moreover, the deeply existential goal — to crush Russia and turn the space in the East into a conglomerate of semi-independent quasi-state entities fighting among themselves — has not disappeared and remains relevant. It is clear that the upcoming meeting of the presidents of Russia and the United States in Geneva on the 16 of June does not indicate that the confrontation between two states is finished. The US does not abandoned their main goal – to destroy Russia and stay one-on-one with China. Obviously, they are just changing the way to achieve this goal. Direct pressure, sanctions and apparent hostility have not fulfilled their role, and now an attempt to strangle Russia in a tender but strong embrace. They wish that new

rhetoric, will turn Russia from an enemy into almost an ally, that in Moscow will be happy if some of the sanctions would be lifted, and promises of cooperation and the conclusion of treaties to limit the arms race will tear Russia away from close relations with China. I believe that all the numerous American political maneuvers and promises are aimed today exclusively at one goal – to reduce Russia's political mobilization on the one hand and cause distrust and crisis in Russia's relations with China on the other.

It seems to me that all these tricks and maneuvers will not have much effect, since the Russian ruling elite over the past years has lost all illusions about the possibility of building equal relations with the United States. In Moscow would rather see the upcoming «big game» as an opportunity to continue the country's economic and social development in a more favorable environment. In the United States, the majority of the elite, which is negatively disposed towards Russia, has not gone away. Even before the historic meeting in Geneva, its representatives are already demanding an end to the slightest rapprochement with Moscow, the rejection of even minimal concessions to Russia. If we add to this the general chorus of American satellites in Europe, such as the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine, for whom the preservation of the Cold War in Russian-American relations is a matter of survival, it becomes obvious that there is very little chance that the «new detente» will last any longer than hours in Geneva. Even those media outlets that support Biden's policy are extremely reticent about the possibility of reversing the deterioration of Russian-American relations, especially since, according to the New York Times, «the list of issues to be discussed by the two leaders includes the prosecution and imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Beside this the newspaper writes that Biden plans also to devote a lot of time to cybersecurity issues, hoping to ease the wave of cyber-attacks targeting the United States»¹⁷.

For Russian President Putin, raising these questions will only be a new irritant. In this regard, another influential American newspaper USA Today believes that upcoming meeting «in all likelihood, it will significantly reduce tension and the risk of war». From my personal point of view only some extraordinary events can change the reality that is developing before the summit.

In this regard, the Russian educated society should once and for all abandon the feeling that there is some sympathy for us in America and in the collective West, and it is only necessary to correctly explain the motives of Russia's foreign policy behavior, as they will surely understand and accept our true aspirations. This is a false feeling that has failed us many times before. To step on the same «rake» again is not just wrong, but also deadly for Russia in this rapidly changing world.

Without the West's recognition of the reality of a new Russia with Crimea, with its important role in the post-Soviet space and with global interests, it is simply not serious to talk about some new detente. And the Russian educated society should once and for all abandon the feeling that there is some sympathy for us in America and in the collective West. This is a false feeling that has failed us many times in history.

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