

Time of Troubles or New Confrontation

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We have moved into the zone of a new confrontation, and so far, we cannot even clearly define its boundaries. It seems that the new confrontation is primarily associated with an understanding of the future and the role of people in its creation, writes Valdai Club Chairman Andrey Bystritskiy. The article is published as part of the Valdai Club's Think Tank project, continuing the collaboration between Valdai and the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy.

The world once again faces troubled times, both politically and climatically. And it is unknown which is worse.

Misfortune never comes alone. As if it was not enough that before 2020, we faced the ever-accelerating disintegration of the world order, Covid and more or less catastrophic results of climate change were then added. In any event, this summer quite convincingly demonstrated to us the particularly dangerous changes that the new weather conditions bring with them: the flooding in Germany alone was bad enough. Another question is: why are these changes taking place? There is still no definite answer. But regardless of this answer, it would be better for humanity to do everything in its power to reduce its influence on nature, or at least not to throw firewood onto the flame of climate change.

Alas, hopes that people will adopt more prudent behaviour are unlikely to come true, because a catastrophe is impending if climate change gets much worse. Such a catastrophe will increase tenfold the impact of natural factors. And this is the catastrophe of the destruction of the world political system, the erosion of values, the decline in the ability of different countries, social and political groups, and cultural models to engage in productive cooperation.

Over the centuries, people have experienced both terrible glaciers and warming with floods only because someone lacked the ability to cooperate to provide for mutual support and, sometimes, even self-sacrifice.

Globally, in the modern world, there is not the slightest reason to expect such a thing. At the

regional level, you can still count on something, albeit with caution. However, this does not solve the problem: the challenges faced by humanity are global.

Covid, by the way, turned out to be an excellent illustration of how the world lacks the ability to cooperate: in helping developing countries, in the mutual recognition of vaccines, in taking measures to place restoring the world economy above everything else. There are examples of cooperation at the regional or inter-country level, but they, for obvious reasons, are limited and, by the way, even within the EU, they were not particularly successful.

But now let's talk not about Covid as such, but about the fact that both the epidemic and climatic problems have only revealed growing global divisions. This split may be even deeper than the split we witnessed during the times of the struggle between the capitalist and socialist systems; the two models more or less shared a set of common values and were intellectually formed within the framework of the same type of thinking. In general, it was Western European philosophical, political thought that somehow formalised both concepts, in all their varieties.

Today, primarily as a result of the rise of China, but not only, it has become clear that we are all in a completely different situation, in which a new confrontation is developing.

Nothing illustrates the situation better than popular culture. Albeit with distortions and exaggerations, it rather clearly shows a picture of

the world, even a picture of the world in which people live.

There are many reasons for the new confrontation.

First, the new communication environment, in which we are all immersed, has sharply intensified information exchange, made all of us much more open and “transparent” to each other. This does not mean that mutual understanding has increased, but rather the opposite: a wild amount of information of various types circulates chaotically between people, giving rise to the strangest chimeras. But these chimeras determine to a large extent the behaviour of both elites and the broad masses.

Second, the so-called West, especially the United States, has largely lost its influence. This is because of increased global economic competition, because of ideological and value conflicts within the Western countries, and because of the well-known intellectual and moral degradation of the elites of Western societies.

Third, for a number of reasons, the self-awareness of rapidly developing societies in countries such as, for example, India or China (but far from only them), which began to develop their own ideas about the desired world order, social and political orders, and so on.

I recently read several popular Chinese novels that deal with the modern world in one way or another. The first thing that caught my eye could be called a difference in understanding, let's say, of “democracy,” and what is “good”

today. According to the most widespread understanding, democracy in the West means “good,” “freedom,” “rights” and “elections” (especially “fair elections”). In the Chinese novels I have read, the most important words are “dignity,” “justice” and “wisdom.” It is emphasised that colossal China needs effective governance; that any failure in it leads to the death of people. The difference between the conventionally “Western” and “Chinese” worldviews, which I have indicated, is not so dramatic in itself. But in the Chinese novels there is a distinct refrain: no conventional “Americans” can believe that their world is better, more valuable than the Chinese one. Moreover, the Chinese writers think that the “Americans” are too aggressive and short-sighted, while the Chinese (for all the flaws they admit) are more cultured, have a much longer history and have incomparably greater social and political wisdom.

Of course, I repeat, this is about novels, about mass culture created for the needs of the general public. But this is precisely what makes me look at such works. By the way, I can recommend watching the Chinese science fiction blockbuster “The Wandering Earth” (based on the novel by Liu Cixin) about how people, primarily the Chinese, save the Earth. According to the film, the Sun is about to explode, therefore, it is necessary to attach engines to the Earth and fly away from the Sun. However, on the way to distant stars, Jupiter begins to destroy the Earth. It seems like there is no way to escape. The mysterious world government (there is a hint of the Americans) decides to sacrifice the inhabitants of the Earth and save the

embryos hidden in a station. But the desperate Chinese still decide to save the Earth with real and still-living people. One of them even sacrifices himself, turning the station into an instrument of salvation. Tellingly, a split occurs in the world government: and a voice with a French accent approves the actions of the Chinese hero. And one more detail: to save the world, a heroic Russian cosmonaut also sacrifices himself: the most experienced and prepared. Nothing would have happened without him.

Implicitly, this film clearly emphasises the effectiveness of the Chinese world order and, by the way, raises the question: what should the model of self-government be in a world in which 7 and a half billion people live? How should justice and the right to one’s own dignity be respected, for example? And what about survival, and overcoming problems?

In general, if we compare the divergence of the models of the world order with the current political aggravation, then there is a feeling that we are immersed in a situation in which any positive interaction on a global scale would be extremely difficult.

Today, the West is striving to protect and consolidate its role as the leading world political force and the main judge of current events, of certain actions of certain countries. But the main thing here today is defence: the West understands that the Arctic glaciers are melting. Hence the desperate attempts to impose their agenda and their unique leadership role. But

non-Western countries, especially large ones, definitely do not want and will not tolerate this. Combined with growing global interdependence, this means that the world system is performing worse and worse because it cannot make the necessary decisions quickly and reasonably enough. There are few options for development. Either it will be possible to find some mutually acceptable modus operandi, or the world system should be radically simplified. There are not many ways of simplification: war or global catastrophe. The latter could be either ecological or a pandemic, or whatever else. The

main thing here is the inability of mankind to resist it cohesively.

The trouble is that we have moved into the zone of a new confrontation, and so far, we cannot even clearly define its boundaries. This, of course, is not just a competition between the United States and China, it is not just a struggle even between some groups of countries among themselves, it seems that the new confrontation is primarily associated with an understanding of the future and the role of people in its creation. **KIEP**