Russia and the Middle East: the process of “concentration” has ended

International analysts have started paying increasingly more attention to the role of modern Russia in the Middle East in recent years. The title of this article brings to mind the words of Prince Alexander Gorchakov (1798-1883), an outstanding Russian diplomat, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Alexander II, who said shortly after Russia’s disastrous Crimean War (1853-1856): “La Russie ne boude pas - elle se recueille” – “Russia is concentrating”. He made it clear that Russia was not surrendering its right to have a voice in international affairs, but was just gathering its strength for the future. Indeed, at that time, Russian diplomacy rejected the articles of the Treaty of Paris on the neutralization of the Black Sea, which were derogatory to Russia’s dignity, and despite the protests of Britain, the great powers had to recognize Russia’s right to have its navy in the Black Sea.

The current situation in the Middle East involuntarily brings to mind those years. The fall of the USSR could not but affect the foreign policy of modern Russia, including in such an essential region of the world as the Middle East. Russia’s influence weakened considerably there in the 1990s. Fyodor Lukyanov, the Chairman of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, said at a discussion entitled “U.S.A., Russia and the Middle East” at the Johns Hopkins University in Washington that the restoration of Russian influence in the Middle East is not a goal of the future, but the process that has been rapidly going on in the recent past, “thanks to Russia’s consistent policy in the region, that is motivated not by the strategic interests of Russia, but by the key principles based on the efforts to prevent the transformation of intervention into the common means of addressing problems in the region.”

Russia is still interested in the predominance of secular regimes in the region, and the prevention of the export/import of religious extremism is the most important challenge of current Russian diplomacy. Russia has consistently opposed the forcible change of regimes in the Middle East and the external interference in the internal affairs of these countries in general. This Russian political expert said that: “Unlike the U.S.A., in its Middle East policy, Russia is guided not by the ideas of bad and good sides, with the subsequent overthrow of the bad guys, or by its own interests, but by the principle of what should not and what should be done”. Moreover, this really is the reason for the success of Russia: Syria was a “turning point in the global mission of Russia”. The U.S. strategy in the Middle East bewilders Russia, because Russian diplomacy cannot understand what are the aims pursued by America. According to Lukyanov, Libya was a “perfect shame”.

Fiona Hill, director of the Center for U.S.A. and Europe in the Brookings Institute, who participated in the discussion, could not but admit the strengthening of Russia’s position: “The U.S. continues to treat Russia as an important participant of the negotiations in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iran”. Hill pointed out that the tactics of Russian diplomacy allowed the country to take advantage of mistakes made by other players to promote its own interests. According to the expert, a positive trend in the development of Russian-Israeli relations, which, in her opinion, is the result of the “Russian roots” of the political elite in Israel, plays a great role in strengthening Russia’s position.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the most famous American political experts, who took part in the discussion, said that “Russia has never left the Middle East – it is close with its soft underbelly in the south”. According to his conclusions, Russia is interested in the restoration of its influence in the Middle East at the level of the Soviet period and would
like to minimize the U.S. presence in the region. However, Russia is not ready for “dramatic” efforts to force out America from the Middle East. According to Brzezinski, no country is now able to dominate in the Middle East: “The Middle East is at the beginning of a new era, and no power has any advantages in this transition period, the possibility of losses is equal for everyone, although we still have, even if marginal, interests in the region.” The U.S. presence is decreasing slowly but steadily in the region, and anti-American sentiments are growing stronger. China has already become a new player in the Middle East, and is increasing its presence there quietly but steadily, returning to the Middle East for the first time after nine centuries of absence. Moreover, China’s presence is not limited to the economy. China is building a foundation of its political participation in the region, which, in particular, may have a negative effect on Russia’s influence, according to Western experts.

According to the participants of the discussion, the balance of the dominant powers in the Middle East will be “absolutely different from that observed in the 20th century” in the longer term. The experts pointed out that the common interests of the U.S. and Russia included the efforts to prevent the spread of terrorism and radical elements. Well, be that as it may, all participants of the discussion, despite their different and sometimes opposing points of view, could not but agree that Russia’s influence in the Middle East was growing primarily due to its skillful diplomacy.

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