U.S. Foreign Policy: between Primarism and Retrenchmentism

A year ago there was held a remarkable discussion on this topic in the International Security Journal. It touched upon the “general line” of American Foreign Policy, which is often referred to in the U.S.A. as the “Great Strategy”. The topic itself, and the time of its discussion, did not accidentally coincide with the start of President Barack Obama’s second mandate. The clearly identified complex of internal and external challenges demanded the reevaluation of places and strategies for the leading player in the new global game, which developed with the ending of the previous game, called the “Cold War”. The events of the year, following the discussion, showed that the relevance of the issues, raised at that time, only increased.

It is necessary to point out that the International Security Journal, issued by the Belfer Center at Harvard University, is one of the most important scientific publications in the field of study of various aspects of international relations. It publishes original articles (often half the volume of a monograph) that are characterized by scientific conscientiousness, which means minimal presence of author’s initial “preferences”, to the extent that this is possible in the humanities.

In the list of the editorial board and the board of trustees of the magazine, there are such iconic names as James Schlesinger, Nathaniel Rothschild, and Joseph Nye. Those circles of the American and international establishment, whose interests they represent, need the most accurate knowledge of the processes occurring in the world, and not propaganda “flavored” interpretation. Therefore, the journal publishes articles by various international relations specialists, and not by information warfare and propaganda fighters.

Supporters of the two currents in contemporary American academic political science participated in the above-mentioned discussion. Some of them call themselves by the term “primarists”, the others do not call themselves anything, but judging by the most popular words in their publications, they may be called “retrenchmentists”.

Speaking about the first group, as it follows from their own self-determination, they are supporters of the United States maintaining its leadership position in the world and most American obligations towards numerous allies, made during the Cold War. The primarists speak for the “deep involvement” of the U.S.A. in all the political and economic processes going on in the world today.

The second group, taking into account the fact that domestic problems are growing, especially in the economic sphere, as well as the exacerbated global political situation, declare the need for retrenchment of both the obligations of the USA and the level of American involvement in conflicts in different regions of the world. The retrenchmentists emphasize that U.S. participation is not dictated by reasons of national security.

Moreover, the preservation of American foreign policy activity, on the scale of the Cold War period, may lead to America’s involvement in local conflicts, such as in Vietnam or Iraq. Such involvement had an incidental character for American interests and led to severe consequences for the national economy, as well as the loss of the country’s image on the international arena.

One article under the heading “Don’t Come Home: The Case against Retrenchment”, written by three primarists...

The essence of the basic problems, discussed in the paper, are already formulated in the first two sentences: “The U.S. is facing a critical issue, due to budget problems, overload of the military potential, restive allies and public opinion, losing interest in [the country’s] global involvement. After 65 years of the global involvement strategy, almost a third of which passed in the absence of competition from any important world power, is it finally the time to retrench?

Many well-known political scientists answer positively to this question, the authors present a list of their names and publications (single-spaced, with size 10 font). Here we can cite Christopher Lane, who has spoken for a long time about the need for American foreign policy to move from the “global domination” strategy (actually, the same “deep involvement” strategy) to an “offshore balancing” one.

The main argument of the retrenchmentists emphasizes that the current strategy of “deep involvement”, without bringing any significant dividends, is fraught with risks for the United States, and these risks will only increase. Supporters of American strategic “retrenchment” consider pointless, costly and dangerous the implementation of commitments to allies who “do not want to increase their spending on defense and, therefore, to protect themselves”. This strategy does not lead to anything, except the growth in anti-American attitudes in the allied countries.

The authors of the above-mentioned article noted that the negative attitude towards the strategy of “deep involvement” began to manifest itself in the course of the unsuccessful military operations in Iraq, and “reached a crescendo after the budget and economic crisis in 2008”. Actually, the whole article aims at proving that retrenchmentists “radically overestimate the costs of implementation of the current great strategy [of the USA] and underestimate its benefits”.

Among the various arguments, invoked to justify the correctness of the primarism as a strategy, is the thesis of the interconnectedness of the global environment, favorable for the U.S. economy, and the fact of the global presence of American armed forces in the world. In this regard, it is stated that a shift in the U.S. policy towards “retrenchmentism”, would lead to a “lower level of [global] security and more conflicts among Eurasian powers”. At the same time, the continued implementation of the strategy of “deeper involvement by maintaining [American] obligations, the policy of containment... will lower the level of competition between key regional powers and, therefore, prevent the emergence of an atmosphere, favorable for a new arms race”.

Six months later, after the above-mentioned article’s appearance – the primarists manifest – the two sides emphasized a series of issues (that differentiate them) in the same International Security Journal. This time, special attention was paid to the problem of containing the spread of nuclear weapons in the world. Each of the parties presented their own arguments, which were to indicate the preferred strategy for American policy to solve this problem.

In addition, the primarists made an important clarification to their position. They pronounced themselves supporting U.S. “deep involvement” only in events that can have really global consequences. These events, according to the primarists may occur in East Asia, Middle East and Europe. They have doubts about the previous decisions of the USA to participate in the conflicts in Haiti, Panama, Bosnia, Somalia and Kosovo.

Judging by the remark of the retrenchmentists, saying that their position today “does not influence” actual American policy, a question arises: How much importance do current leaders of the United States attribute to the conflict in Ukraine, and how “deeply” are they going to get “involved” in it? Is this conflict as important as the Sino-Japanese conflict, or as important as the conflicts in Panama, Bosnia,...?

The current U.S. political practice in Ukraine will allow for not only answering some of the questions raised in the academic debate of American scientists, but can also lead to some conclusions about the practical significance of the recent words of the Minister of Defense Chuck Hagel. He said that the United States could no longer afford to conduct ground operations as expensive as those undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These words were spoken at the end of February of this year, during discussions of the draft of the U.S. defense budget for the next fiscal year. Is it possible that the retrenchmentists underestimate their importance in shaping the current U.S. foreign policy?
Vladimir Terekhov, leading researcher at the Asia and the Middle East Center of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".