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"The interests of the Russian Federation and the United States in relation to Ukraine are incompatible with each other"

Stratfor CEO George Friedman on the root causes of the Ukrainian crisis

Well-known American political scientist GEORGE FRIEDMAN paid a visit to Moscow. The private intelligence and analytical agency Stratfor, headed by him, is often called the "shadow CIA" in the United States. In an interview with Kommersant, he spoke about the goals the United States is pursuing in Ukraine and explained why these goals are incompatible with Russia's interests.

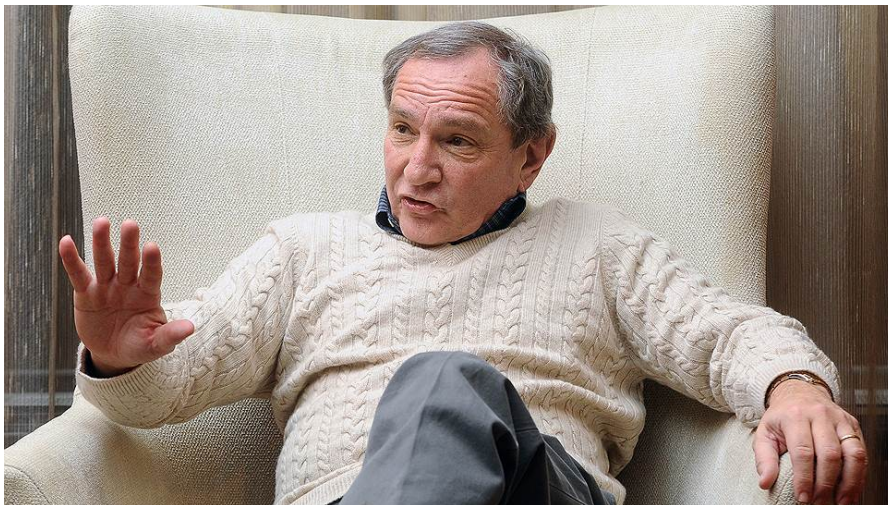


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— In your analytical works you talk about the fragmentation of Europe. In what way does it manifest itself?

- During the Cold War, the borders within Europe were mothballed. There was an understanding that if you start to change them, it will lead to destabilization. As soon as the Cold War ended, the redrawing of Yugoslavia's borders began. Later, in fact, the borders in the Caucasus changed. More recently, 45% of Scots voted for independence. The Catalans are striving for independence.

Against this background, I do not consider the Ukrainian situation (when one part of the country seeks rapprochement with the EU, and the other gravitates towards Russia) as something completely unique. The Ukrainian situation fits into the centrifugal trends that we have been observing in Europe for some time. After all, until recently, no one thought that the British-Scottish issue, which seemed to be settled 300 years ago, would again arise with all its severity. In other words: the Ukrainian crisis is connected with Russia, but not only. It is also connected with the processes in Europe, with the crisis in Europe itself.

- European politicians say that it is Russia's actions in the Ukrainian direction that will destabilize Europe.

- Europeans are very proud of what they call their "exclusivity": supposedly they got rid of wars and have been living in a world of stability and prosperity for more than half a century. But until the early 1990s, Europe, in fact, was occupied by the USSR and the USA. And then there was Yugoslavia, then the Caucasus. The European continent has never been truly peaceful.

- But representatives of the US administration, as well as the leadership of the EU member states, explain the tough policy towards the Russian Federation by the fact that, having annexed Crimea, Russia for the first time since World War II "redrawn the borders by force."

The Americans know that this is nonsense. The first example of changing borders by force was Yugoslavia. And Kosovo was only the culmination of this process. And the US is directly involved in these events.

- What is the goal of US policy in the Ukrainian direction?

- The Americans have had a very consistent foreign policy for the past 100 years. Its main goal is to prevent any power from concentrating too much power in its hands in Europe. At first, the United States sought to prevent Germany from dominating Europe, then they prevented the strengthening of the influence of the USSR.

The essence of this policy is as follows: to maintain the balance of power in Europe for as long as possible, helping the weaker side, and if the balance is about to be significantly upset, to intervene at the very last moment. So the United States intervened in the First World War after the abdication of Nicholas II in 1917, preventing Germany from strengthening. And in World War II, the United States opened a second front only very late (in June 1944), after it became clear that the Russians were gaining the upper hand over the Germans.

At the same time, the United States considered the most dangerous potential alliance between Russia and Germany. It would be a union of German technology and capital with Russian natural and human resources.

- And now the United States, who, in your opinion, is holding back?

- Now they are engaged in blocking a number of potential regional hegemony - Serbia, Iran, Iraq. At the same time, the American authorities are resorting to diversionary strikes. Say, in a fight, when an opponent is about to defeat you, you can kick him in the side to throw him off balance. The US is not looking to "defeat" Serbia, Iran, or Iraq, but it needs to create chaos there to keep them from gaining too much ground.

- And what tactics do they use with respect to Russia?

The fragmentation of Europe is accompanied by the weakening of NATO. European countries, in fact, do not even have armies. The United States within the framework of the North Atlantic Alliance is the only strong country from a military point of view. Against the background of the weakening of Europe, the relative power of Russia has grown significantly.

Russia's strategic imperative is to have as deep a buffer zone as possible on its western borders. Therefore, Russia has always had a special attitude towards Belarus, Ukraine, the Baltic states and other countries of Eastern Europe. They are of great importance for Russia's national security.

At the beginning of this year, Ukraine had a slightly pro-Russian but badly shaken government. It suited Moscow: Russia does not want to completely control Ukraine or occupy it - it is enough that Ukraine does not join NATO and the EU. The authorities of the Russian Federation cannot allow a situation in which the Western armed forces will be located a hundred kilometers from Kursk or Voronezh.

The United States was interested in forming a pro-Western government in Ukraine. They saw that Russia was on the rise and sought to prevent it from consolidating its position in the post-Soviet space. The success of pro-Western forces in Ukraine would make it possible to contain Russia.

Russia calls the events of the beginning of the year a US-organized coup d'état. And it really was the most overt coup d'état in history.

- Do you mean the termination of the agreement of February 21 or the entire Maidan?

- Together. After all, the United States openly supported human rights groups in Ukraine, including with money. And the Russian special services missed these trends. They did not understand what was happening, and when they did, they failed to take measures to stabilize the situation, and later misjudged the mood in Eastern Ukraine.

- So the Ukrainian crisis is the result of the confrontation between Russia and the United States?

- Here you have two countries. One wants Ukraine to be neutral. And the other is for Ukraine to be part of the line of containment of Russian expansion. It cannot be said that one of the parties is wrong: both act on the basis of their national interests. It's just that these interests are incompatible with each other.

For the Americans, as I said, it is important to prevent the emergence of a hegemon in Europe. And lately they have begun to worry seriously about Russia's potential and intentions. Russia has begun to move from the defensive posture it has held since 1992 to reasserting its sphere of influence. The point is the fundamental discrepancy between the national interests of the two great powers.

- What in the actions of the Russian Federation could alert the United States?

- Russia began to take certain steps that the United States considered unacceptable. First of all, in Syria. There, the Russians demonstrated to the Americans that they are able to influence the processes in the Middle East. And the United States has enough problems in this region without the Russians.

The Russians intervened in the processes in the Middle East, among other things, because they hoped to get an instrument of influence on US policy in other areas. But they miscalculated. The United States considered this an attempt by Russia to harm them. It is in this context that the events in Ukraine should be considered. The Russians apparently simply did not calculate how seriously the US would take their actions or that they would easily find countermeasures. The United States, in the current situation, looked at Russia and thought about what it wants least of all - instability in Ukraine.

Do you consider Ukraine revenge for Syria?

No, not revenge. But the Russians interfered in the processes in Syria while the US was solving problems in Iraq, was negotiating with Iran... In Washington, many got the impression that the Russians wanted to destabilize the already unstable US positions in the Middle East, in a region that has a key meaning for America.

In Washington, there were two points of view on this: that the Russians were just playing the fool, or that they found a weak point in the United States and were trying to take advantage of it. I'm not saying that Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict caused the Ukrainian crisis, that would be a stretch. But this interference has led many in Washington to decide that the Russians are the problem. What to do in such a case? Do not enter into a confrontation with them in the Middle East. It is better to divert their attention to another problem in another region.

Now I am simplifying everything a bit, it is clear that everything is actually more complicated, but the causal relationship is the same. In the end, the bottom line is that it is in the strategic interests of the United States to prevent Russia from becoming a hegemon. And it is in Russia's strategic interests to keep the United States out of its borders.

- And what, from your point of view, is the meaning of American sanctions? Russian authorities say the US wants to bring about regime change.

"The purpose of the sanctions is to hurt Russia with minimal damage to the US and a little more damage to the EU so that it capitulates to American demands.

Sanctions demonstrate US strength. And the United States willingly uses this force against countries that have nothing to adequately respond to this. It is also an opportunity to "build" the Europeans. I do not think that the main goal of the United States is regime change in Russia. The main goal was to limit the room for maneuver of the Russian authorities, which is what we are seeing. But other factors also played a role here, such as the decline in the Russian economy, the fall in oil prices.

- In Russia, many say that oil prices have fallen because of the US conspiracy with the Persian Gulf countries.

- Troubles are always easier to explain by someone's deliberate actions. But a number of countries, including China, India and Brazil, have cut their growth forecasts for their economies. Europe generally has zero growth. At the same time, the oil revolution is underway, the volume of available oil is growing.

The fall in oil prices was inevitable. What else did you expect? But you have built your economic strategy, focusing not only on high oil prices, but in general on the export of energy resources. It made you vulnerable! It was necessary to use the last 10-15 years of high incomes from the sale of energy resources to diversify the economy, but your authorities did not do this.

- Should we expect improvement in Russian-American relations after the next presidential election in the United States?

- In Russia, American politics is too personified. In the United States, the president is just one of the institutions of power, he is not omnipotent. Obama is also bound hand and foot, like his predecessors. If groups like the Islamic State are rapidly gaining strength in the Middle East, it doesn't matter if the US president is a Democrat or a Republican - he will have to strike at them.

And no American president can afford to sit idly by as Russia becomes ever more powerful. Russia's actions in the Middle East and, for example, in the case of granting asylum to Edward Snowden, were perceived in the US as directed against American interests. Any US President would be forced to react to this. Three years ago, I predicted in one of my books that as soon as Russia began to gain strength and demonstrate it, a crisis would occur in Ukraine. It was obvious.

How realistic do you think Russia's rapprochement with China is?

- China now has many problems of its own - economic growth is declining, high inflation and unemployment. Don't expect gifts from Beijing. And the construction of a pipeline to China, for which the Russian authorities will have to spend substantial sums, is unlikely to have any tangible effect on the Russian economy.

— How do you see the further development of events around Ukraine?

- Russia will not make concessions on the Crimea, this is obvious. But I believe that she may face serious problems with the supply of the peninsula. At the same time, Moscow cannot retreat from a number of its demands regarding Ukraine. It cannot allow the Western military to appear on the territory of Ukraine. This is Moscow's nightmare, and it limits its room for maneuver.

The US will need to make a strategic decision, not now, but in the future: either to intervene more actively in events in Ukraine, which is fraught with difficulties, or to build a new alliance - inside NATO or outside NATO - with the participation of Poland, Romania, the Baltic states and, for example, Turkey. It's already happening, slowly, but it's happening. And it will be something that Russia does not accept: a "cordon sanitaire". The United States does not need to control Ukraine itself, it is important for them that Russia does not control it.

Much will depend on Kyiv. Kyiv authorities are the weak point of Ukraine. If it splits - which is surprisingly not observed now, Russia will try to turn it in its favor.

But the main question is whether Russia can stand on its own. She is now faced with many factors that led to the collapse of the USSR: this is the lack of an effective transport system; it is a skeptical attitude towards the capital in

many regions from the Caucasus to the Far East; but the main thing is the economy, which functions only under certain circumstances, namely, high energy prices. You have only one product, and it is now in oversupply on the world market.

Interviewed by Elena Chernenko and Alexander Gabuev

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The ghost of negotiations

The first attempt to establish a dialogue between Kiev and Moscow ended in failure

Despite assurances from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky about his readiness to discuss the neutral status of the republic, the first attempt to establish contact between Kiev and Moscow since the outbreak of hostilities failed. According to the Kremlin, the Ukrainian authorities initially agreed to talks in Minsk, but then demanded that they be held in Warsaw, and then "generally left the connection and took a break." But without any pause, the Ukrainian leadership continues to try to get the allies to urgently build up military assistance to Kiev and tighten sanctions against the Russian Federation. The West agrees with the need for this and is preparing new packages of sanctions. On Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and President Vladimir Putin fell under the restrictive measures of the European Union and Great Britain.

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