



# **RESULTS 2020: THE FUTURE IS BEING SHAPED TODAY**

**DIPLOMATIC ACADEMY OF THE RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY**

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In 2020, the world had to go through a period of complex and uneven development and sharp changes as humankind was faced with old as well as increasingly new challenges to global development. Those events occurred very intensively throughout the year, with practically no let-up.

The first and direst of them was the dangerous crisis that arose at the beginning of the year caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic, which significantly changed the world's geopolitical and economic landscape at the global and regional levels and influenced the modalities of the evolution of modern international relations, global politics and its line-ups, and also the requirements for strategic planning and countries' readiness to mobilise.

The transformation of the modern world has become a fully visible reality, with the pandemic acting as an additional catalyst to this process. At the same time, it became obvious that there were multi-directional factors in this situation and how it influenced the state of affairs in the world. It did not lead to a softening of geopolitical differences; on the contrary, it exacerbated the ideological and informational confrontation without changing the underlying national interests of the main actors (after all, in general, the pandemic rather strengthened the existing trends than set new ones). If anything, it increased the threat of conflicts, but at the same time, it also strengthened the role of states as the main actors in international affairs amid de-globalisation and regionalisation, and accentuated the need for synergy of their efforts to overcome the most acute problems. In other words, the crisis has become a catalyst for a "re-dealing of cards" in global politics, revealing the negative and positive aspects of modern international affairs, exposing some outdated ideas and tasks of national foreign policy, and gaps in the system of priorities for



international cooperation, but also opening up new opportunities for states' policies in a qualitatively new global environment. Thus, cooperation on the epidemiological plane has already emerged in the world arena as a new phenomenon and an example of international cooperation for the future. In this context, there is an increased need for a search for ways to form a fairer and more natural world order that is able to prevent a regression of humanity as a result of unforeseen cataclysms. As Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasised at the G20 summit last November, "this crisis must become an opportunity to alter the trajectory of global development" for the benefit of all nations and peoples. This goal can be attained only by acting in full accordance with the imperatives of our time, in the spirit of cooperation and solidarity, and recognition of the cultural and civilisational diversity in the modern world, which means, first of all, its value dimension and models for social development and social cohesion.

There has been wider acceptance among the expert community that political and economic players will only be able to find solutions that are beneficial for all parties – so that everyone wins, without losers or victors – by relying on the concept of a polycentric world order, which has already proven effective at the regional and partly at the global level. The predominant opinion nowadays is that ideas such as global polycentrism, national sovereignty and sovereign equality of states, non-interference in internal affairs, and a balance of forces and interests are becoming very attractive to many societies, and even more so to "tired" national elites. There is a general belief that the current crisis is contributing to the restoration of a hierarchy of identity, natural for many peoples, based on the priority of national interests, but without weakening of the "reasonable" multilateralism factor – as opposed to attempts to impose on others some



selfish concepts of a “unipolar” world order (in the spirit of slogans such as America First and the like), a choice in favour of isolationism and protectionism.

The recent developments have demonstrated that the United States, with its global leadership ambitions, is no longer able to control the rapid growth of new regional leaders and self-sufficient geopolitical processes on the world periphery. At the same time, Washington has noticeably intensified its attempts to impose a unipolar order on humanity under the slogan of a “rules-based international order,” bypassing universal institutions, as well as the norms and tools of the post-war international legal order – now by prodding Europeans and, if possible, India, towards full alignment with American political attitudes, while shutting out Russia and China. However, the process of the formation of a polycentric world has gone far enough by now to be perceived by most of the world community as an objective reality. Therefore, Western countries’ efforts towards rallying on the prior basis of “double containment” of Russia and China actually point to a certain protective trend in global politics, a movement “against the tide,” which suggests their low effectiveness, although, of course, this trend calls for careful consideration and an appropriate response.

Many experts believe that one of the distinctive features of 2020 has been the aggravation of the confrontation between the United States and China – not only the trade, economic and technological wars, but also military and strategic controversy. Many assessments suggest that emergence of a “new bipolarity” and the degradation of US-China relations are becoming the new dominant constant of our era. It is also necessary to take into account such factors as the weakening of the political influence of the “hegemon” – the United States – and China’s self-determination as a



global power. However, it would be reasonable to base our assessment of the overall results of the year on something else – taking into account the weight and influence of Russia as one of the leading actors in international affairs, as well as the actual multistructurality of the emerging world order (including the residual bipolarity in the sphere of strategic stability from the Cold War period), which, through regionalisation among other things, refutes any hierarchical structure in global politics and works to strengthen horizontal ties – our assessments should rely not on the prevalence of this dichotomy, but on polycentricity being a universal, complex and self-regulating system. This last concept underlies Russia's picture of the world. Moreover, the new US president's team has already declared its intention to neutralise the damage from the trade war with China, and Beijing, in turn, now says it is expedient to “strengthen dialogue with the United States at all levels.”

One can only welcome Washington's transition from a total confrontation with China to a streamlined competition within the framework of America's announced return to the international law and multilateral diplomacy track, including to the WHO and the Paris Agreement on climate. On the other hand, it should be understood that, as this year's presidential election in the United States has shown, American society is now going through a radical and, presumably, long-term transformation (something Russia and China have been through for several decades), as indicated by the sharp polarisation of moods. Donald Trump did not suffer a crushing defeat; his electoral support in fact grew by 11 million votes compared to 2016, as 47 percent of Americans voted for him, and his real popularity rating in the country, as experts admit, is about 7 percent higher than the level indicated by the polls usually conducted by the liberal media. His



legacy will be difficult to deal with, not only because his voters – the mainstream white America – stand firmly behind him, but also because he has demonstrated a real alternative to the entire post-war strategy of the American elites. The archaic US electoral system, with its indirect presidential elections and significant procedural differences between states, has not performed to its best advantage, and that inevitably makes many Americans question the new administration's legitimacy.

No matter what you think about Donald Trump's policies, they are ultimately aimed at demilitarising the notion of national security, with a focus on national development interests, which are gaining priority in all countries. Discussions on this subject have been ongoing in the American political expert community for many years. You can agree with those who believe that the influence of Trumpism on the United States will last as long as the influence of Reaganism: it's just that the pendulum has moved away from neoliberal economy and globalisation, and the pandemic has only accelerated this trend. It is also obvious that the Democratic electorate has been divided and is now a coalition of heterogeneous forces and population groups, such as ethnic minorities, women and young people, who have united to remove Trump from power but who actually have widely different interests and agendas. Will the gerontocratic liberal elites find a common denominator and pursue an effective policy at home and in a "very different world," as Joe Biden has admitted? The Biden and Trump electorates have been even hit by the coronavirus pandemic to a different degree, which has influenced the search for a balance between people's health and economic recovery.

When it comes to a movement towards a multipolar world, it is of priority importance to uphold the UN as a unique and the only legitimate



instrument for maintaining peace and ensuring global and regional security. It is also extremely important to strengthen UN bodies, many of which, including, in part, the WHO, with which the United States has severed relations, were subjected to unsubstantiated attacks in 2020 under the guise of the need for their renewal (actually, liquidation) in the spirit of a US promoted “rules-based order.” Directly connected with this is the protection of the system of international law as the basis for civilised international relations, especially in the context of open attempts to undermine or circumvent it. The events held in the autumn of 2020 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the UN have shown the commitment of the international community to the fundamental principles of justice and mutual respect, which form the basis of international law and the UN Charter, including the principle of sovereign equality, the commitment to refrain from the use or threat of force in violation of the UN Charter, non-interference in the internal affairs of states, respect for the sovereign integral right of all states to choose their own political, economic, cultural and social systems, peaceful settlement of disputes, the condemnation of all forms of terrorism, and other principles.

A dramatic strengthening of unpredictability in political and military-political processes in 2020 is another major challenge of the modern world. Considering Washington’s withdrawal from the majority of arms control agreements, including its refusal to extend the New START Treaty, which is vitally important for preserving international peace, we are seriously concerned about the current situation in the field of strategic stability, which will likely remain complicated in light of Joe Biden’s intention to conduct talks in this sphere from positions of strength (which Berlin intends to support) and to maintain a hard line on the INF Treaty. At the same time,



his hints in favour of the extension of New START make it possible to continue trying to save at least part of mutual arms control obligations and not rule out, at least hypothetically, the possibility of further moves, based on equality and respect for each other's interests, towards preserving the Open Skies Treaty and relaunching the INF Treaty, which could decrease the possibility of the continued overall deterioration of Russia-US relations. This would fit in with the declared US intention to normalise its foreign policy, including respect the opinion of its European allies. In this case Biden would act as an anti-Trump. This is also a reason to hope for the United States' return to the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In 2020, the West gave some ground with US foreign policy changes and new developments in the Western countries' domestic political life. The growth of populism and nationalism, as well as the strengthening of both extreme left and extreme right parties and internal party factions became widespread. The stratification of American society caused by racial and social differences destabilised political life making it highly unpredictable.

Russia-US relations are now at their worst since the end of the Cold War. The continued negative dynamics are fraught with the risk of further escalation. In its budget for a new 2021 fiscal year which began on October 1, the United States has earmarked \$700 million to oppose Russia and an additional \$24 million to deal with "Russian propaganda and disinformation." This and the sanctions pressure indicate that Washington and the West in general are gradually adopting a "hybrid" confrontation stance towards Moscow.

Certain opportunities for effective cooperation are still there, but they have become more uncertain. In addition to arms control, they include





interaction in the Arctic. Russia's forthcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2021–2023) makes it possible for many years of constructive interaction between the United States and Russia to be put to good use, especially in the maritime region of the Bering Sea and the Bering Strait.

The EU member states have faced a completely new set of phenomena over the course of the year, although each European country had its own particular variety. Nationalism and right and left populism are there side by side with the mounting Euroscepticism. The European elites' efforts aimed at preserving the political course of the EU along the so-called "middle path," which involves the peaceful and legitimate rotation of established parties, have encountered stronger opposition on the part of fringe groupings. In some European countries, these forces have managed to become part of the political establishment, despite resistance by the deep state. Although the EU has achieved high levels of integration in some areas (trade, economy, finance, etc.), a further transfer of authority to supranational bodies has stalled despite the overall success of the European integration process over the past three decades. The general picture looks inconsistent and reflects the dual nature of the European integration association, which has not yet become a federation, but is no longer a confederation of individual countries, as became particularly clear during the pandemic. In the course of overcoming the sanitary and economic crisis, the unique role of the national states in Europe has become particularly clear even though, at the same time, the EU has adopted large-scale collective measures designed to jointly overcome the COVID-19 crisis. No ground-breaking solutions allowing the EU to get out of the geopolitical impasse should be expected in the foreseeable future. Hence, the desire for the psychological comfort of former US-led transatlantic relations,



although trust has been seriously undermined over the past four years, America has changed and one can hardly expect that the world can return to its old ways.

Unfortunately, the world has yet to overcome political violence and to settle conflicts. The threat of international terrorism continues to mount, including in Europe. Strong measures are being taken to combat this scourge, which emboldens criminal, extremist and radical political groups around the world. They were forced to launch an offensive. The militants who had been squeezed out of Syria found themselves transferred to Nagorno-Karabakh, the site of Armenian-Azerbaijani armed confrontation. Stronger border controls in the wake of the pandemic have led to terrorists and extremists of all stripes seizing “virtual territories.” They are increasing their presence in cyber space, social media, instant messengers and other forums, taking advantage of the lack of effective control on the part of the state.

In the autumn of 2020, a wave of terrorist attacks swept through Western Europe (Nice in October and Vienna in November) which led to stronger far-right anti-immigrant views among the “native” Europeans. This, in turn, led to the adoption of dubious decisions in the spirit of Islamophobia and launched a flywheel of reciprocal radicalisation of the first- and second-generation immigrants in France, Austria, Germany and other countries.

In an effort to stop or even reverse the growing trend towards the weakening of its economic and political positions in the world arena, the West continues in its attempts to impose the idea of the controlled chaos on the world community. It is moving the wave of this chaos closer to Russia’s borders. This wave has already swept Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova



and the South Caucasus and is approaching the Central Asian countries. The resistance to foreign interference in Belarus and the settlement of the aggravated Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Moscow's mediation are examples of a successful approach to the resolution of regional problems, which is reducing the opportunities for the interference of extra-regional forces in the spirit of the Big Game of the 21st century or the Cold War of the 20th century. At the same time, Russia has confirmed the historical continuity of its positive role in the post-Soviet space and revealed the counterproductive character of the Western policy of harassment.

All of this aggravates the confrontation between the world's leading states and increases the risk of their involvement in local and regional conflicts. Many foreign and domestic experts predict that the next decade will be even more turbulent and unpredictable than the past one. A global armed conflict is unlikely owing to current nuclear deterrence, but wars on a smaller scale – local or even regional involving the direct or indirect participation of the world's leading states – are becoming an increasingly realistic scenario.

In 2020, the de-freezing of conflicts in the post-Soviet space and the persisting conflictogenity in many other regions of the world pointed to the growing crisis of trust between countries and peoples. In this context, the international organisations established following WWII and designed to prevent new armed clashes in the world were subjected to strong criticism. Such dangerous trends as the disintegration of the arms control system that took decades to develop, gained momentum. On the whole, the world preserves the vestiges of the past although it would seem that the pandemic and its consequences would compel humanity to abandon mutual



grievances and national ambitions and pool efforts in the face of this new danger.

Against this background, the Asia Pacific Region has demonstrated some promising dynamics. In this region, a striving for multi-polarity and consensus solutions forms the foundation of political traditions and realities. Thus, many Asian countries have rebuffed Washington's attempts to ensure its domination through the undermining of multilateral integration institutions (APEC, ASEAN, etc).

It is noteworthy that most countries in the region are trying to pursue a multi-directional foreign policy and are intensifying their search for new partners and guarantors of stability. The associations and forums, particularly BRICS and the SCO, are conducting effective activities in the region. These two organisations have demonstrated, in practice, the impressive results of the synergy of international efforts with the national interests of various countries. This is increasing their importance as regional lynchpins. The Russian presidency of these associations in 2020 has provided new evidence of the demand for specific joint actions from these states in the most important areas of global development. This is confirmed by the final documents adopted by the SCO and BRICS summits in Moscow last November (importantly, their participants also managed to discuss a number of complicated issues on the sidelines of their official meetings, for instance, the difficult situation in relations between China and India). In addition, considering the core role of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific Region, the successful integration work of this authoritative organisation over the past year played an important role. Russia and ASEAN are committed to ensuring an equitable and fair peace and stability in the region. The success of this regional policy is demonstrated by the creation,



at the end of the year, of the free trade area in the format of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with the participation of the ASEAN countries, as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

It is vital to have the opportunity to promote a major Russian initiative of a Greater Eurasian Partnership in security and economic and humanitarian cooperation in Asia Pacific so as to create a broad contour of common development, which will align regional integration processes (while keeping the door open to European countries) and form the basis for strengthening peace and security throughout Eurasia. Life itself is prompting the need to work constructively to “unite the potentials” of integration associations for overcoming a broad range of challenges and implementing large-scale cross-border projects in Eurasia, as President Vladimir Putin said at the APEC Summit in November 2020.

Latin America is a region of political benevolence, economic opportunity and cultural and mental proximity, which allows maintaining a conflict-free and comfortable atmosphere for interaction. The priority goals proceeding from the current challenges include information and communication support for Russia’s assistance to Latin America through the supply of a coronavirus vaccine. The traditional mutual empathy and civilisational affinity of our nations are fertile ground for promoting a positive image of Russia, cultural cross-pollination, proliferation of our languages and spiritual values, as well as the preservation of memory of important events in Russian history and the history of Russian-Latin American relations.

Global trends are having an impact on the developments in the Middle East and North Africa, where the former omnipotence of global powers has



not disappeared but is being diluted, even though the overall situation remains unstable. Positive achievements include the crushing defeat of the Islamic State in the majority of Syrian regions, the launch of a political dialogue and economic revival of Syria, the obvious failure to pursue military solutions to the conflicts in Libya and Yemen, as well as a ceasefire and the start of an inclusive political dialogue in Libya. However, stability will not be restored quickly there; political processes will be complicated and, most likely, faltering and tenacious. The reasons for this are the complexity of the problems, deep mistrust between the internal parties to the conflict, and the clashing interests of external players. Russia has countered this with a multi-directional policy, military presence in the region and a unique experience of multilateral diplomacy it has accumulated in Syria, which has been used to reduce the intensity of and subsequently to terminate military confrontation.

A special place in the global picture that has developed over the past years belongs to Africa, with its huge human and resource potential and the African nations' striving for integration, sustainable development and a more active and independent involvement on the international stage. It is increasingly obvious that the African countries are becoming a power base in a multipolar world, and that they are participating more energetically in the formulation of international decisions on the key issues on the regional and global agendas. This process is being promoted by the visibly growing ties between Russia and the African countries, which can be seen from active preparations for a second Russia-Africa Summit in 2020 and Russia's large-scale assistance to African efforts against the coronavirus pandemic.

Another global phenomenon came to the fore in 2020 posing the goal of overcoming the fallout of the pandemic crisis for the global economy.



According to the IMF, slower economic growth aggravated by the pandemic has led to the global economy coming almost to a standstill. According to the IMF, most of the world's largest economies were facing a deep recession at the end of 2020 from 4 percent in the US to 10 percent in the UK (Russia is closer to the upper range of this forecast at minus 4.5-5.5 percent). Difficulties have arisen related to disruptions in global and national logistics and production chains, changes in consumer preferences, adaptation of workplaces to the demands of social distancing, as well as the risk that sectors of the "contact" economy like tourism may never recover, which could boost unemployment and bankruptcy rates.

Concurrently, large-scale transformation processes are gaining momentum. They stem from the transition of the global economy to new technology and economic systems. The global economy is shaken by trade wars and climate disasters. The transition to an innovation-based economy – both digital and green – has brought to light more differences that can provoke social conflict. We must not forget about the destructive policy of extraterritorial sanctions that has come back with a vengeance this year. Initiated mostly by Washington, they were even used with regard to the pandemic-related supply of goods and equipment, which was declared unacceptable by most UN members.

In these circumstances, all countries and international organisations need to coordinate their global efforts and national responses as closely as possible. It is necessary to strike a balance between maintaining epidemic security and preventing unjustified damage to the global economy, international trade and cross-border contacts. In this regard, it is important to put together qualified assessments as well as detailed and verified forecasts for the future of the global economy, which are not yet clear and



in most cases look rather like preliminary and variable assumptions, which, according to dominant opinion, need more attention from analysts.

The movement towards the goals of sustainable development defined by the UN is a priority area for the future development of global civilisation. The UN's FAO, which celebrated an anniversary this year, has a significant part to play in this. Much has been done to create support entities in preparation for the upcoming UN Food Systems Summit 2021.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of Great Victory in the most horrible war of the 20th century and the anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials. This was a victory of good over evil. A great and bright hope was given to humankind. At the same time, the goal of preserving the memory about that Victory, opposing the rewriting of history, revising the outcomes of the war and the glorification of Nazis and their accomplices has become very important.

It can be said that the global development crisis that has hit Western society and communities and the acceleration in 2020 of the de-globalisation process correspond, overall, to narratives about the deep crisis of the liberal world order and the remaining relevance of the Westphalian principles of international relations that dominate Russia's agenda.

Sooner or later, turbulence will be replaced by a more stable system. Russia needs to participate in forming this and be prepared to live in new circumstances. It will need a combination of sovereignty and military-political power with economic flexibility and an open society. Russia's success in the international arena will be closely linked to its human capital, internal stability, the state of the investment climate and the effectiveness of state institutions, including in terms of ensuring social cohesion.





Diplomacy has always played and will continue to play an important role in capitalising on this final foreign policy resource. Diplomacy is also changing noticeably right before our eyes. Its structure and methods are changing in the face of new challenges, and more new areas are becoming available. The modern information space is filled with new terms, such as humanitarian, digital, scientific or cultural diplomacy. However, we can safely assume that the substance of diplomacy – the building of state-to-state relations and managing them – cannot, at least in the foreseeable future, be carried out without direct face-to-face contact, which has long served as the basis of the diplomatic method and remains relevant in new circumstances as the most important tool for creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, without which no agreement can be reached.

Today, the growing role of cultural diplomacy as a soft influence to popularise national culture and to promote a positive image of the country is typical of international relations. Ultimately, it is supposed to create additional conditions for expanding cooperation between states in the long term. Cultural policy has become an important element of implementing foreign policy and makes it possible to address the issues of preserving national identity and cultural diversity, countering interethnic conflicts and unfair pressure on behalf of individual states or their associations. Increased cultural cross-border contacts between people and their communities in 2020, which have not weakened during the pandemic, but, on the contrary, took on new approaches and formats, including online formats, corroborate the validity of this assertion, including for Russia. The projection of Russia's narratives abroad was in high demand. Within this complex configuration of realities, forms and methods of implementing



international relations, the proportions of global and regional problems that came to light in 2020 allow Russia to position itself as a responsible player in international politics, which remains willing to pursue international cooperation despite the remaining ideological barriers and political differences.

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