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Only National Interest Can Be the Driving Force of Foreign Policy

S. Ryabkov

Armen Oganessian, Editor-in-Chief of International Affairs: Sergey Alexeevich, the first question is on the surface. What was the reason for taking the black boxes of the Malaysian Boeing to the UK – a country the government of which, like the U.S. administration, has put the whole blame on the insurgents and Russia before any investigation?

S. Ryabkov: We do not want to dissect every episode politically, and we have no preconceptions as to which of the experts and specialists can handle this task. For us it is fundamental that our representatives were included in the group. Our interest is in the truth. So far, we have no reason to believe that there is any fraud or manipulation. We, no less than others, are interested in establishing the truth, perhaps even more. Therefore, we expect that in collaboration with the British and Dutch and with the Malaysian side, with which, from the outset, we were in meaningful dialogue on this topic, we will be able to complete the investigation phase.

A unique experience, the knowledge of the specifics and, unfortunately, the accumulated considerable resource of investigations by experts of the tragic situations that have occurred with passenger planes in all the years of the existence of civil aviation make it possible to work in a competent and focused manner, and not in a politicized way. Incidentally, that is why Russia had insisted on the inclusion of relevant provisions in Security Council resolution 2166, which created the legal basis for this work.

Q: There was talk to send Dutch and Australian police to the crash site to protect it so that further investigation could take place. There is a subtext

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in this proposal. Could it lead to internationalizing the entire conflict? Because the Ukrainian side will not be able to ensure the safety of the foreign police.

A: The initiative of sending police teams to guard the site came from the governments of countries whose nationals perished in the crash. These governments entered into the relevant agreement with Kiev. We were ready to discuss all this in a concrete, energetic and purposeful way in order that this activity occurs within a framework that suits all. However, actually the core of the problem is the unwillingness of Poroshenko and the Kiev government to ensure a ceasefire and, most important, to start a constructive dialogue with the militia and leadership of Donetsk and Lugansk. For this reason, much of what needs doing, and without which there can be no restoration of calm around this situation, does not occur. We do not find adequate response either from Kiev or from the capitals that push the current Kiev authorities towards continuing the confrontation, towards continuing the so-called anti-terrorist operation.

This is a great tragedy for southeastern Ukraine and indeed for the entire Ukraine; it is one of the most painful episodes in the recent history of the region. We understand the situation in all of its nuances. It is necessary for the Kiev authorities to revise their approach cardinally.

Q: *For all the differences, both Russia and the United States insist on a crucial condition: that there be a ceasefire and the end of fighting. Can we expect the U.S. to be really adhering to this?*

A: Unfortunately, the actions of Washington are often radically at variance with the assurances and signals we get through confidential diplomatic channels and in the form of public comments by the U.S. administration. The gap between word and deed has been glaring. Nothing is more alarming in our current relations with the U.S. than the disparity between American assurances of help in restoring normality and American practical, broadening and acquiring new forms support for Kiev, which, of course, sees this support as an indulgence to go on with

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its dead-end course, as a kind of nod to crack down on the protest in southeastern Ukraine. Of course, those assurances matter, we do not discard them, but the U.S. assurances must go hand in glove with specific constructive steps. So far, we see nothing of this; rather something opposite is happening.

The realization of President Putin's initiative for the OSCE to deploy monitors at the checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk on the Russian-Ukrainian border is the most recent case in point. While professing in words their interest in this, the U.S. in fact prevented the OSCE Permanent Council from adopting the decision for almost more than two weeks. One can say a lot about how great a gap has formed between the good wishes and intentions of Washington and what it is actually doing in relation to the crisis in Ukraine.

Q: The notorious Paul Wolfowitz has said that the first objective of the U.S. is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival in the territory of the former Soviet Union. This, he said, is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that Americans should prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would be sufficient to generate a global power.

Do you not think that every U.S. administration has been implementing in the post-Soviet space the doctrine that Wolfowitz expounded?

A: Mr. Wolfowitz is one of the neocons. This is the most rightist conservative wing of the Republican Party. The consistency of the United States policy of preventing integration in the post-Soviet space really impresses. It is an American foreign policy constant, regardless of change of administration.

I would like to say a few words about something else. The fact is that in recent years we have often used the phrase "double standards in U.S. policy." In analyzing developments in and around Ukraine, I have concluded that in the U.S. policy in this area there are no "double standards" at all. But there is one only standard – to prevent by any means the post-Soviet space from consolidating; to hinder people living in different parts of this vast region, people who in one way or another feel their spiritual, historical and personal relationship with Russia from realizing their aspirations. This standard aims to impose on them other behavioral patterns and to plant governments politically and ideologically alien to them. Geopolitical fragmentation depending on what priorities the leaders of

particular territories set for themselves is the only standard followed by Washington, irrespective of whether Mr. Wolfowitz is in power or he criticizes from the right what is happening under another administration.

Often in Washington, inter-party struggle is at the level of debate on budget amounts to cover the costs of health insurance or prescriptions, but never on whether the country's foreign policy towards particular regions is essentially correct. The entire American political elite believes the U.S. is the "source of good" and that he who does not understand it, falls into great error.

One can talk long about the fate of the Westphalian system and the destruction of the doctrine of national sovereignty. It turns out that the United States fully recognizes sovereignty only for itself. The rest have but two options: either they will themselves limit their own sovereignty and accept a relationship with the U.S. on American terms or they will have problems. This fundamental limitation of the opportunity to have a somewhat different look at the world is a tragedy. Thanks to Mr. Wolfowitz that he called a spade a spade. We will also call a spade a spade.

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Q: How much have our relations with the U.S. worsened?

A: We currently face an across-the-board reduction in the scale of cooperation, and this is by decision of the United States. We ourselves have not touched on any question from the point of view of exerting a "demonstratively proactive" influence on the mood in Washington. All that we undertake is solely by way of response and reaction to unacceptable U.S. moves. However, traditional cooperation forms, dialogue and the tackling of some concrete issues are frozen. I would not like to think that they are fully struck off, but in today's setting, the prospect of restoration is very vague.

Our premise has always been that in building relations and maintaining an ongoing dialogue with the U.S., Russia does nothing for the sake of the United States. Whatever we do is in our own carefully considered interest, and that is as it should be, because only national interest can be the driving force of foreign policy. If the U.S. believes it does not need

our cooperation or that what it did vis-à-vis Russia was only “as a favor” to us, then that is wrong.

I do not know whether the time will come in the near future, when this administration is able to admit the mistake. If not, then all will stay as it is. Of course, I do not foresee a new “reset” (to use the American term), because in anti-Russian rhetoric, in a bid to “punish” us for something Washington has gone too far. To roll all this back is difficult. I stress, however, that we will continue the course to be in dialogue, to quietly convey to the partners our views on every issue and try to keep what is in our interest; we will continue working on the themes that are hopefully of interest also to the U.S.

Q: Sergey Alexeevich, one of the merits of the “reset” is the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, in the elaboration of which you took an active part. Will we see its erosion?

A: I do not think that you should make judgment on the basis of some current processes outside the realm of arms control. The judgment should be based on the effectiveness of the document and, above all, on its resilience to external influences. This document from the outset seemed to us reciprocally advantageous, it is harmonious from the balance of interests perspective, and there are no unwarranted concessions. The big amount of commentaries that accompanied the signing and then ratification of this document is unparalleled. If so, then there is no reason to call into question this instrument, which provides greater security for the U.S. and Russia and is conducive to the maintenance of strategic stability.

It’s another matter that there are people in the U.S. who in anti-Russian rage reject Russian approaches, primarily on regional issues. They attempt to influence the administration and lawmakers. If something goes not the way they like, the answer is only one: sanctions.

Q: One of the latest proposals submitted for discussion by U.S. legislators is to raise the status of Ukraine to a privileged partner, which presupposes military and technical assistance to and more active military cooperation with Kiev. How would you comment on this?

A: The question is not with what arms to pump up Kiev authorities, or in what quantity. The question is that without political dialogue, without constitutional reform, peace and stability will remain elusive. The energy

now being spent on hyping up the issue of granting Ukraine the status of a “privileged non-NATO partner” would be better used toward peace and the task of making Kiev come to grips with reality and launching a political process in Ukraine.

I would like to note that in parallel an unprecedented smear campaign is ongoing against us. The accusation is that we are supplying heavy weapons to insurgents and this with no evidence to back it up. You know, it is very convenient for Americans and NATO to say they have intelligence but can’t disclose it, because it is “intel.”

We are willing to repeat every day that this is no more than slanderous attacks. The Russian Foreign Ministry has already stated more than once about the lies and slander the U.S. is increasingly using in its foreign policy.

Q: Based on your experience in the foreign policy process, do you think NATO and the U.S. might directly intervene militarily in the Ukraine conflict?

A: I think that those who have such temptations, even though not verbalized, but subconscious, at the level of dreams, should urgently take a sedative or consult with medical professionals, because the perniciousness and disastrousness of this approach are obvious to every normal person.

Q: How serious an effect on Russia have the sanctions declared by the U.S.? The estimates vary from “blue murder” to “mosquito bite.”

A: Of course, there’s no reason to scream blue murder. We feel the negative impact of the sanctions of the United States, the European Union, Canada, and a number of other countries in the form of an increase in the cost of normal activities for Russian economic operators. We see attempts to exploit the specifics of operation of our defense industry in order to complicate the solution of particular problems of ensuring our defense capability. No way. Incidentally, here I would like to note that it is very cute when people, while signing with one hand the rescripts on sanctions against Russia’s defense industry, are writing with the same hand instructions to continue active work with the Russians on further disarmament. They think Russia did not behave as prescribed in their “book of life” concerning Ukraine, hence the sanctions. However, things which interest

them should continue in previous mode, the sanctions notwithstanding. It does not work this way. Therefore, our countermeasures.

While certainly not “blue murder,” it is also of course not a “mosquito bite,” this is serious stuff. A further problem is that the West, the U.S., the EU and other countries will find it hard to step back and repeal all this. It is obvious that they simply will not be able to achieve the objectives they have set out for themselves in their sanctions policy on Russia. They will reduce the chances of effective work on other issues that are of great interest to them, because this cannot remain without answer.

Q: Recently, the Financial Times published an article alleging that China, Iran and Russia aim to reshape the world order and tend to engage in “revisionism.” How would you comment on this statement?

A: Commenting on publications in newspapers, even in such a reputable one as the Financial Times, is not in the rules of the official representatives of the Foreign Ministry. However, I would like to dwell a little on the word “revisionism.” Of all people, it is our British colleagues, sophisticated British columnists, who should not speak about revisionism. We in Russia want to find a steady platform for a worthy, normal international life, for the normal and fair conduct of international affairs, when you do not need to “check” each step with, inter alia, the capital where are the editorial offices of the respected newspaper Financial Times.

Q: Only two or three years ago, we were told that BRICS was only a statement of the fact that there existed a certain group of countries in the world. What is BRICS today?

A: BRICS is still an informal association of the five states, which are gradually expanding their agenda of work, including political and economic issues, as well as other applied matters. We already have serious experience in financial cooperation; I do not even count the establishment of the development bank and currency reserve pool. In recent years, the BRICS countries have been coordinating their positions ahead of periodically convened meetings of the Bretton Woods Institutions, as well as interacting within the Group of Twenty. There is more and more concrete collaboration in areas of everyday life in all societies, ranging from science and technology to agriculture.

Yes, it would be better to have a greater practical effect, a greater

impact in terms of results. However, if you look at the time range (the BRICS idea put forward by Russian President Putin in 2005, the first summit held in 2009, the next expected in Ufa in 2015), it is but a small period in history as compared to the duration of other international institutions, and during this time, BRICS has had many accomplishments.

The political agenda is expanding. For example, the Fortaleza Declaration contains very serious statements and important signals concerning Syria, Afghanistan and Iran. It is the basis for our collaboration with the BRICS partners on many sensitive subjects. I am confident that the process of the consolidation of BRICS, still an informal association (we do not suggest creating a rigid structure or even less so an organization), will continue.

Always being in danger of voluntaristic, unmotivated and inherently absurd decisions that Washington policy makers impose on the American and international business communities is something we cannot accept.

Q: What was the need to set up the BRICS Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement? There is, after all, the International Monetary Fund?

A: The International Monetary Fund is in need of reform, and the important thing is that the G20 agreed on its parameters. We have worked and are working within this organization and believe it rightly reflects the current balance of power, including economic, on the world stage. The problem is that there is no progress in implementation of the decisions, primarily because the U.S. administration is blocking the agreed quota reform in the Fund. A number of countries do not have sufficient influence on the IMF decision-making, and this situation no longer corresponds to the actual weight and the degree of responsibility of these states, particularly the states forming BRICS. Therefore, the creation of the BRICS Development Bank and the joint foreign exchange reserves pool is a way to find an answer to this situation. More precisely, just to hone tools that will help, without the difficulties experienced by our countries in relations with the IMF and IBRD, to engage in the tasks of both financial stabilization and the funding of important projects.

I do not want readers to conclude that there is a contraposition between the BRICS tools and the decades-old practice in very many countries. There is no rivalry.

First, there is incomparability of the accumulated resources in the World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) and the IMF with what the BRICS enterprise will be. Secondly, the challenges are entirely different. The BRICS tools are not a means to project economic power outwards; they are additional levers for coping with specific tasks, even though not limited to the territories of the BRICS countries. However, there is a nuance about reducing their engagement with the Bretton Woods Institutions.

Just as well, we need a national payments system, and I firmly believe in it. You never know what can sometime happen in the corporate leadership of, say, Visa or MasterCard in terms of their policies toward Russia. Therefore always being in danger of voluntaristic, unmotivated and inherently absurd decisions that Washington policy makers impose on their own and international business is something we cannot accept.

Q: Does BRICS have an ideology or a super idea?

A: There is no ideology, nor can there be. However, we are committed to a multipolar world, we believe that it is necessary to strengthen international law, we feel that it is necessary to regulate international processes and solve problems through balanced interests, compromise and dialogue. Here are three maxims – they are obvious and probably indisputable. There is no hidden agenda of BRICS. What is going to be next for this association? There will be evolutionary development. We aren't speeding up anything. We believe that along with the establishment of goals and formulation of plans we must focus on practical work, especially as over the years this practice has become increasingly specific and requires the attention of professionals. That is, this is a two-track movement – gradual raising of the bar of expectation and goals while implementing specific things which were already agreed upon.

Q: We have seen active cooperation with China. But what about Latin America and Africa?

A: I would like to see an even greater amount of concrete results. They are there and should not be underestimated. You can't measure everything

just by the number of signed agreements or the volume of deals, although in this field, too, the recent period has been quite impressive. The visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to a number of Latin American countries, coupled with his participation in the BRICS summit and in the outreach event also in Brazil, where leaders of the majority of South American countries had arrived, became a great opportunity to advance bilateral relations with each of these countries.

We do not base our policy in Latin America (as in Africa) on geopolitical dogmas so inherent to our colleagues in the West. This is not a zero-sum game. We do not think that if we somewhere boost relationships or achieve breakthrough agreements (which do exist) with a number of countries in different areas, this is done to damage or harm someone. We think it is normal for countries to share an attraction towards each other that, although geographically distant, seek to acquire new partners, and such will be the case in the future. We encourage those who are suspicious of Russia's policy towards Latin America and Africa to view it unbiasedly in terms of the advancement and protection of Russian interests and the formation of new partnerships for our country.

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