

POWER DISTRIBUTION ON THE WORLD STAGE: THE IMPACT OF THE CRIMEAN CRISIS

Alla Roşca

Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines the power distribution on the world stage and emphasizes the Russia-US relationship as its essential element. The article approaches the crisis in Crimea from the system level perspective and seeks to answer the question of its impact on the distribution of power in the world order. Furthermore, the paper examines the interpretation of the uni/multipolarity as expressed by the US and Russia. The article concludes that the crisis did not change the distribution of power on the global stage and became a concentrated expression of the dispute about the multipolar world.

Keywords: US – Russia relations, multipolar world, distribution of power, Crimean crisis.

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INTRODUCTION

The Crimean crisis and the annexation of Crimea by the Russia Federation are viewed as the biggest crises between Russia and the West since the Cold War. What's happening in Ukraine is under the scrutiny of researchers, journalists and political leaders at all levels of analysis. Putin's ambitions and motivations were analyzed at a personal level; on the national level the "Post imperial syndrome" of the Russia's Foreign Policy and the foreign policy of former soviet states were examined. At the system level the debate among journalists, scholars and international relations experts was concentrated again on the New World Order and the creation of the New Era in international relations. In these discussions it was stated that after the Crimean crisis "the world will never be the same" and that we are witnessing "the beginning of new world."

This article will approach the Crimean crisis from the system level perspective and will focus on the following questions: What is the impact of the Crimean crisis on the world order? What is the effect of the Crimean crisis on the power distribution? What are the consequences of the Crimea crisis to the international system?

In order to find answers to those questions this article will analyze the concept of world order, uni-polarity, bipolarity and multi-polarity, and the historical development of the distribution of power on the international level after the Cold War compared to today. This article will examine the concept of the distribution of power in different world systems. The Crimean crisis will be examined as a case study in order to understand the distribution of power on the international level and the influence of great/regional powers.

ANALYSIS OF EXISTING RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

The system level of analysis operates based on units

that include all states, and it considers the position of states in the international system and their interaction. The position of the states is defined as the systemic structural level of the distribution of power, as a great, middle or small power. The most important factor here is how powerful the state is within the international system. The interaction among states represents the systemic process of investigation defined by practices such as negotiations and formation of coalitions. The analysis includes finding out which state aligns with which other states and which state negotiate with which other states (Goldstein, 2013).

The concept of polarity is not new in international relations and it has been an important part of political thinking. However, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that the idea of polarity internalized its theoretical descriptions. Among the first classical realists, it was Hans Morgenthau who analyzed the international system at the beginning of the Cold War and realized that bipolarity was one of its main features (Morgenthau, 1948). Neorealist scholars later elevated the concept of polarity to the systemic level. According to the most prominent neorealist author, Kenneth N. Waltz, structures are defined by the ordering principle of the respective system, by the specification of functions of the system units, and by the distribution of capabilities across units (Waltz, 1979). Waltz claims that the international system is anarchic and its main components – nation states – are like units and the only feature of the international system is the distribution of capabilities, i.e. the system polarity.

Scholars do not agree on the definition of system polarity and there are different interpretations of polarity. A classical unipolar world is characterized by one superpower, no significant major powers, and many minor powers. The superpower, or hegemonic power, has its interests in different parts of the world, and can defend those interests. A bipolar system has two predominant states or two great rival alliance blocs. Bipolarity is a distribution of power in which two states have the majority of economic, military, and cultural influence

internationally or regionally. The United States – Soviet Union standoff seemed to provide stability and peace to the international system. There was relative power parity between the two states and they preserved the balance of power (Waltz, 1964).

A multipolar system typically has five or six centers of power, which are not grouped into alliances. Each state participates independently and on relatively equal terms with the others. The multipolar system was most notable in the 19th century and was characterized as a balance of power, when several states were influential actors in the international system (Nau, 2012). Stability in the multipolar world can be achieved through the collective leadership of the world's leading states in addition to international institutions, most notably, the United Nations', which offer ways for solving the governability problem. However the distinctions between bipolar and multipolar systems are not always clear, and there are scholars who believe the international system was always either bipolar or multipolar and never unipolar until the end of the Cold War (Waltz, 1979) though others describe several periods of world leadership (Mansfield, 1994). The difficulties of measuring system's poles led some neorealists to use the analogy of oligopolistic markets. Waltz argues that "the question (of poles) is an empirical one, and common sense can answer it" (Waltz, 1979, p. 100-101).

Scholars are also debating the question of system polarity and stability, i.e. which system is more stable. Although classical realists stressed that multipolar system is more stable (Morgenthau, 1948); or that war proneness is relatively low in the bipolar system (Waltz, 1964); some authors are arguing that unipolarity favors the absence of war among the great powers and comparative low level of competition for security because the leading state's power advantage removes the problem of hegemonic rivalry from world politics (Wohlforth, 1999). This argument is based on hegemonic theory that stipulates that especially powerful states foster international orders that are stable until differential growth in power produces a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge the dominant state. The conflict is most likely under two circumstances: when the overall gap between leader and the challenger is small and/or when the challenger overtakes the leader in some elements of national power (Kugler & Lemke, 1996; Sheetz, 1997/1998).

One of the most important characteristics is identifying the different focal points of power and its distribution in the international system. Although one can hardly find two scholars of international politics that have the same understanding of power and its key elements, for our analysis of system polarity it is more important to follow the concept of shift of power from one state to other. The theory of power transition seeks to explain the transfer of power, the changes in national capabilities and the conditions under which the leading state loses its position to a challenger. Originally formulated by A.F.K. Organski and Jecek Kugler, this theory tried to explain the relative shift in the distribution of power in the international system. (Organski & Kugler, 1980). The idea of power transition points to an occasion when the challenger is dissatisfied with its international status quo and war is

likely to break out. As the theory's very name suggests, following the power transition theory, a necessary though insufficient condition for the change in the power distribution, of the international system, the occurrence of an actual transition in power. That is, a once-dominant state loses its leadership position to a faster-growing state/s, and the latter assumes the role of the leading state/s.

To develop the theoretical requirement even further, challenging states should be rapidly gaining power capabilities and assuming responsibilities on the world stage. It is necessary to evaluate relative national powers and power capabilities when examining the changes that occur in a power system. In this context, the analysis requires a sensible measure for national powers and power capabilities of different international units.

THE UNI/MULTIPOLAR WORLD AFTER THE COLD WAR

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and at the end of the Cold War, the United States became the only superpower on the world stage. In Wohlforth's formulation: "Two states measured up in 1990. One is gone. No new pole has appeared: 2-1=1." (Wohlforth, 1999, p.10). Most of the relevant foreign policy scholars also agreed that the world became unipolar (Kagan, 1998; Kupchan, 1998; Haass, 1999; Ikenberry, 2001; etc.). The system was unipolar and possessed only one great power that faced no competition.

In the first two decades of the post-Cold War, the US exercised most of the economic and military influence on the international politics. The US hegemony was clearly supported by empirical evidences of national power capabilities. In their analysis, Organski and Kugler had argued in favor of the parsimony and analytic utility of an important indicator of national power, as represented by Gross National Product (GDP) (Organski, Kugler, 1980). This indicator offers a succinct measure that tends to be highly correlated with the other measures of national power. It therefore offers a simple, yet informative, basis for capturing relative national status. In 1991 the US economy was the definite leader, and was not challenged directly by any other national economies. Table 1 shows that the next economic competitor, Japan, scored at approximately 57 percent of the US GDP. In 1991 US GDP was \$6.1 trillion compared with Japan's \$3.5 trillion. Subsequent economies, those of Germany, France and the UK, were approximately 29%, 20% and 17% of the US GDP (World Bank, 1991).

The US was the only "pole" to possess global interests and was able to defend those interests independently. The US had unmatched global power-projection capabilities. The US defense spending was "close to half of global military expenditures; a blue-water navy superior to all other combined; a chance at a splendid nuclear first strike over its erstwhile foe, Russia" (Monteiro, 2011-2012, p.9). According to data of the military expenditures, the US has been and continues to be by far the most powerful state; the US military expenditure in 1991 was about \$463 billion. France, for example, in the same year spent about \$70 billion, or approximately 15 percent of US military spending, and the UK spent about 12 percent of US

military spending (SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 1991-2013) (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparing power distribution

a. Gross Domestic Product as percentage of superpower

	1991	1995	2000	2005	2010	2013
USA	100	100	100	100	100	100
China	6.1	9.5	11.6	17.2	39.6	55
Russia Federation	8.3	5.2	2.5	5.8	10.2	12.5
Brazil	6.6	10	6.3	6.7	14.3	13.4
India	4.5	4.8	4.6	6.4	11.4	11.2
South Africa	1.9	2	1.3	1.9	2.4	2.1
Japan	57.3	69.6	46	34.9	36.7	29.2
Germany	29.3	32.9	18.3	21.1	22.1	21.6
France	20.2	20.5	12.9	16.3	17.1	16.3
UK	17.3	15.4	14.5	17.7	15.3	15

b. Military Expenditures as percentage of superpower

USA	100	100	100	100	100	100
China	4.5	5.6	9.40%	12.3	18.9	27.7
Russia Federation	N/A	8.2	7.9	8	9.1	13.7
Brazil	3.4	5.6	6.4	4.6	5.3	5.8
India	3.8	4.8	7	6.2	6.8	7.9
South Africa	1.2	1	0.9	0.8	0.6	0.8
Japan	10.7	13.8	15.3	10.6	8.2	9.6
Germany	14.6	12.9	12.8	8.1	6.9	8
France	15.3	15.8	15.7	11.2	9.2	10.1
UK	12.9	11.8	12.2	10	8.7	9.1

Sources: GDP figures calculated after GDP. World Bank. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

GDP (current US\$); the Military Expenditures calculated after Military expenditure by country, in constant (2011) US\$ m., 1988-2013. Retrieved on June 23 from http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database

The clear superiority of the US in hard power is also supported by a strong advantage in soft power and development of information technologies. Total US expenditures on research and development nearly equal the combined total of the rest of the Group of Seven (G-7) (Landler, 1999). In the beginning of 1990s US developed and had competitive advantage in cutting-edge technologies; in 1995 the US had a 9 to 1 advantage in

Internet users per capita in comparison with other developed countries such as Japan, France and Germany (Table 2). Five years later, the US still enjoyed the highest proportion of Internet users (43 percent), but the gap has since been reduced significantly (in 2000 Germany had 30 percent of Internet users per 100 inhabitants; Japan – 29 percent and U.K. – 26 percent) (Internet users, 1995-2000).

Table 2. Internet users per 100 inhabitants

	1991	1995	2000	2005	2010	2013
USA	1.16	9.24	43.08	67.97	71.69	84.2
China	N/A	0	1.78	8.52	34.3	45.8
Russia Federation	N/A	0.15	1.98	15.23	43	61.4
Brazil	N/A	0.11	2.87	21.02	40.65	51.6
India	N/A	0.03	0.53	2.39	7.5	15.1
South Africa	0.01	0.68	5.53	7.49	24	48.9
Japan	0.04	1.59	29.99	66.92	78.21	86.25
Germany	0.25	1.84	30.22	68.71	82	83.96
France	0.14	1.64	14.31	42.87	77.28	81.92
UK	0.17	1.9	26.82	70	85	89.84

Source: Internet users per 100 inhabitants. Millennium Development Goals Database. UN Data. Retrieved on June 24 from <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=internet+users&d=MDG&f=seriesRowID%3a605>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the United States enjoyed a large margin of superiority over all other powers combined. The Figure 1 shows that in 1991 the US exercised a great influence of the economic and military influence in international politics. The United States is the first leading state in modern history with preponderance in all components of power: military, technological, and geopolitical and with symmetrical concentration of resources.

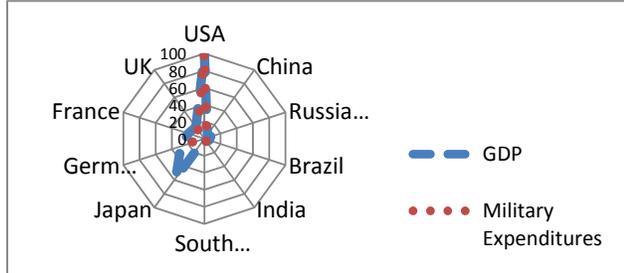


Figure 1. Power concentration in 1991

Sources: Compiled from data in Table 1.

The US was the leading country and also central participant in any effort to tackle major global problems. American officials were often engaged in spreading American values principles, and practices. At the 1997 G-7 summit in Denver, where Russia was also invited, the US President Bill Clinton acknowledged “our leadership of the world economy, the obligations and the opportunities that come with it...” (President Clinton, 1997) emphasizing the success of the American economy and proposed it as the model for other countries. The best summary statement of American power and uniqueness was made by the Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence H. Summers, when he called the United States the “first non-imperialist superpower” (Koechler, 2002).

The world superpower was able to impose its will on other countries. For example, US skillfully used diplomacy and ensured United Nations (UN) support for the Desert Storm military operation in January 1991 when Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq invaded Kuwait. Although Moscow did not cooperate in the operation, they gave tacit approval for the attack, but the US decision to attack Yugoslavia in 1999, which shares longstanding Slavic ties with Russia, exacerbated the tensions between US and Russia (Russian premier, 1999). The Clinton Administration’s decision to interfere in Kosovo with NATO support but without UN Security Council approval did not get the international support nor did it lead to the creation of a multinational coalition.

After 9/11 the discrepancy between the US doctrine and the Charter VII of the resolution of the UN Security Council regarding the criteria of a “threat” and the international use of force opened a gate to arbitrariness and anarchy in the relations between states. The United States acted unilaterally after September 11, 2001 in the name of the “international community” and launched a new strategic doctrine of ‘preventive war’ (or ‘pre-emptive strikes’), which was incompatible with the UN Charter of use of force in international relations (Lukyanov, 2010). In

this case, the United States acted as a global judge and placed itself outside – indeed above – international law.

Furthermore, a dangerous precedent was created when the US unilaterally invaded Iraq without the UN Security Council’s approval. (Iraq war illegal, says Annan. 2004). Unilateral actions on the part of the US led to strong disparities in the entire system, exacerbating global imbalances and backfiring on the initiator. The opposing foreign policy initiative of the US represented a clear step toward a transformed world order. This great dissatisfaction with the US foreign policy was straightaway reflected in the international polls; about 73 percent of the global population disapproved of the US invasion in Iraq (World View, 2007).

The United States, in its role as the world superpower with no other authority to check its actions, acted on its great power ambitions and weakened itself by misusing its power internationally. According to Waltz, the “wide latitude” of “policy choices” allows the superpower to act capriciously on the basis of “internal political pressure and national ambition” (Waltz, 2000). At the same time, other states attempt to balance their own capabilities against the lonely superpower. When the superpower is weakening, regional powers attempt to gain control in their respective region.

The discussions about the failed unilateral leadership were matched with the debate about the modern principles of new world order. The number of international actors continued to increase on the world stage, and the world became more interrelated. It became common practice to criticize the main international institutions such as United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which were created in a different era and needed to be reformed, or even replaced. However, the lack of a clear concept of structural elements necessary for a new international system represented a problem in developing new international institutions.

The new principles of world order were debated in the context of state sovereignty. The globalization process significantly altered the global landscape and weakened state capabilities. The creation of the European Union (EU), where states voluntarily limited their sovereignty in the name of common economic progress was viewed as the future new order, but the EU experience cannot be extrapolated to other parts of the world, and the failed federalization of EU proved the difficulties of this experience.

When considering the reconstruction of the global environment and the new international system, it is also necessary to analyze the concept of new conglomerates of economic interest, of centers of economic growth and of alternative centers of power. New conglomerates of economic interest are comprised of regional powers and will create a new world system (Verhofstadt, 2008). It can be argued that EU and China are the most relevant examples of the creation of such regional power conglomerates, and some attempts were made to create this kind of structure in Latin America, Africa and Gulf area.

The regional leader would become the ones that would “set the rules of the game and at the same time, contribute to maintaining stability” (Zoellick, 2005, para. 9).

With its large population and the high economic growth rate China has a real potential for developing power capabilities. However, it can be argued that China’s behavior on the world stage does not confirm the logic of regional power, and Beijing’s foreign policy demonstrates no global ambitions or readiness to share global responsibilities. The EU movement to create a common foreign and security policy is slow and goes to the heart of state sovereignty and this is a much more challenging task for the long term. This is why the US supports the EU partnership as European countries pose virtually no chance of becoming a geopolitical competitor.

The United States, however, often takes the initiative for multilateral cooperation, as for example in the case of imposing a ‘no fly zone’ in Libya. America will not be content itself with the role of a regional power and will not give up its leadership role, especially when those behaviors are supported by the economic and military advantages.

Some authors suggest that potentially Russia can become such a regional center, (Lukyanov, 2010); although it depends on the possibility of overcoming its demographic problems, its obsolete economy and its corruption issues. As analyzed below, Kremlin’s increasing activity on the world stage determined the Russia-US relations to become one of the ‘essential elements of the multipolar world’ (Safranchuk, 2008).

THE DEBATE ABOUT MULTIPOLARITY

The debate between U.S. and Russia about the distribution of power on the global level have intensified during the Crimean conflict. The crisis was not seen by the US and Russia as a local or a regional conflict, but as a dispute on the system level—and of the world order. Furthermore, the US and Russian interpretations of unipolarity versus multipolarity were contrasting.

The US considers multipolarity through the scope of an American-led hegemony, providing emerging world powers with the possibility for further development. Proponents of this approach believe that giving more rights to the regional powers, such as India, Brazil, China and Russia will create more stability on the international level (Bergsten, 2008). Yet this does not coincide with the concept of multipolar distribution of power on the world stage.

Russia’s interpretation of multipolarity, however, was initially oriented against the American hegemony and the unipolar world and had the goal of elevating the lost Russian prestige after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the period following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia’s foreign policy was characterized by a desire to integrate itself into existing international institutions and to be accepted by the Western world as an equal partner. Russia’s goals included its inclusion into global organizations such as the World Trade Organization, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and to be accepted as one of the world leading countries in G-7. After the Soviet Union collapsed, and especially in the first half of the 1990’s, Moscow was

ready to assume a subordinate status to the western powers, but soon Moscow became disillusioned that any steps taken to meet the world powers halfway were not matched by the West (Tsygankov, 2013). The West used Moscow’s weak position to gain unilateral advantages and this has led Kremlin to enhance its own capabilities and increase its strength.

The turning point was Putin’s confrontational speech at the Munich conference in February 2007, where he attacked what he called ‘illegal’ US unilateral military action and argued that it had made the world more dangerous. Putin referred to the question of the unipolar world, expressing dissatisfaction over the US’ domination “as a single center of force and one single master” (Putin, 2007). Putin effectively announced that Russia was no longer seeking integration in the western community, and that the goal of Kremlin’s foreign policy was to achieve the status of a great power and to assume responsibility for maintaining strategic stability in Eurasia.

In this context, it was not accidental that President Obama visited Moscow early in his term in office. The White House knew that a potential ‘reset’ of the relationship between the US and Russia represented the possibility to overcome the deteriorated US-Russian relations during the Bush administration and especially after the Russia-Georgian war in 2008. The Obama administration tried to play up to Russia’s self-esteem and to compensate for the neglect and lack of respect, and tried to achieve progress on issues important for the US, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and non-proliferation.

Even with the ‘reset button’, metaphor used over and over again, the differences in national interest and different geopolitical relevancies remained the central source of friction between the American and the Russian government (Applebaum, 2009). The paradox of the US – Russian relationship is that both states see each other as a declining power. Russia is challenging the US’ role as a world superpower, and Washington does not believe in the future of Russia. US Vice President Joe Biden suggested in his interview the extent to which the White House believes the balance of power is shifting toward Washington; that a weakening Russia will bend to the US. Biden pointed out that Russia has a diminishing population base, withering economy, and a degrading banking sector and infrastructure, and it will have to rethink its national interest (Biden, 2009). The US is not taking Russia’s claim to the role of an independent pole seriously, especially when compared with the economic growth of China.

THE CRIMEAN CRISIS

It is within this context of US-Russia disputes that the Crimean crisis further exacerbates the existing tensions. For the US, Ukraine is not one of the countries of direct geostrategic concern and only presents interest as being in the geographic proximity of Russia. An improvement in the balance of power of Ukrainian authorities would weaken the Kremlin’s power in the region and increase the possibility to influence Russia.

For Russia, Ukraine is the county of direct strategic interest in the former Soviet Union space. Ukraine is more than a neighboring country for Russia, as Russians and

Ukrainians have a common Slavic origin of their languages, cultures and historical background. Kremlin acknowledges that Ukraine's participation in the Eurasian Union would be important to the success of the union. Russia has strong ties with the Crimean peninsula and it contains a large ethnic Russian population who is strongly pro-Russian. Since the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004, Russia has intimidated Ukraine for attempting to forge a closer association with the West. While Ukraine supported Georgia in the war with Russia, Moscow's aim was to expand its influence over the economic and political orientation over the 'near abroad' (Koren, 2014). Moscow regularly provoked conflicts between Crimea and the central government in Kiev in order to increase its influence in Crimea and in the Black Sea region (Crimea, 2008).

The beginning of the Crimean conflict can be traced back to Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich rejection of the EU Association Agreement and to his decision to instead pursue agreements with the Russian-led custom union. He could have made a long-term deal with the EU to boost trade and integration, but he accepted a \$15bn loan from Russia and chose to integrate the country into the Eurasian Union. But what has happened in Ukraine was more than the anger over Yanukovich's decision.

A close analysis of the events shows the escalation of the conflict from both sides. Yanukovich's decision brought people to Kiev' Maidan, and after the police tried to confront them, the protesters fortified the square (EuroMaidan rallies in Ukraine, 2014). Eventually, a coalition government impeached the president, but not in accordance to constitutional procedure. (Sindelar, 2014). One of the first issues the new parliament had tackled was that of the language, abolishing the regional languages and establishing Ukrainian as the sole official state language of all Ukraine, including Crimea, which is populated by a Russian-speaking majority. (Traynor, 2014). This triggered protests in the southeastern regions of Ukraine and in Crimea.

In the meantime, Putin ordered a military exercise on the border with Ukraine, and at Russia's Black Sea base on the Crimean peninsula. The regional parliament of Crimea, surrounded by the armed gunmen, decided to hold a referendum on Crimea's future. The referendum on March 16th was only meant to 'confirm' a parliamentary vote to secede, and was reported to have 97 percent support to join Russia. On March 18, Putin signed a treaty formally annexing Crimea and the Russian Federation Council ratified the treaty (Russian Federation Council, 2014). The US and EU ordered sanctions, but they were mostly limited to Putin's allies and people linked to the events in Crimea. The EU countries are willing to extend sanctions, but disagree on how to do so since Britain has a long relationship with wealthy Russians, and Germany and France rely on Russia for its natural gas.

The international reaction to the Russia's annexation of Crimea shows divergence in opinions and a split between the West and non-Western countries. NATO resuscitated operations in Baltic countries and severed co-operation with Russia. Western democracies - EU, EP and G-7 - rejected the referendum and the unilateral annexation. On March 27 the UN Security Council voted 13-1, with China

abstaining, to condemn the referendum, but Russia vetoed the draft resolution. The UN General Assembly approved a resolution describing the Crimean referendum as illegal: 100 countries voted in favor, 11 nations voted against and 58 have abstained (General Assembly, 2014). The voting procedure was interpreted differently by different media; while the West emphasized the fact that the vast majority of countries accused Russia for its annexation of Crimea (Vote by UN General Assembly isolates Russia, 2014); the pro-Russia sources announced that the UN vote showed a definite trend that Russia was not isolated in its stance on the Ukraine crisis (UN vote shows Russia far from isolated, 2014).

Russia blamed the Western countries for provoking of the conflict in Ukraine that 'started a coup' in Kiev. Moscow also continuously said that Crimea's referendum is analogous to Kosovo's independence movement of the 1990s and it is about the right of self-determination of the people of Crimea (Russian Federation Council, 2014).

Meanwhile, the White House is trying to downplay Russia's influence in the world and does not recognize it as a regional power. President Obama mentioned that Russia is behaving in a '19th century fashion' and is not a regional power (Obama, 2014). The US President cancelled the G-8 summit in Sochi (G-8 Summit, 2014) and proposed to prevent Russia's participation in G-7 meetings due to it having violated international law (World Leaders, 2014). Even in the context of the confrontation with Russia over Crimea, Washington did not consider Russia to be a primordial security threat to the United States.

In the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Russia is using the world stage to debate the uni/multipolarity issue. The Kremlin is exploiting this argument to attack the US' unilateral foreign policy and to trumpet the beginning of the multipolar world. In his annual Q&A speech, Putin stressed that the unipolar world is gone (Putin's annual Q&A session, 2014). In emphasizing multi-polarity, the Kremlin highlighted the importance of cooperation with other major regional powers such as Brazil, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). The fact that BRICS did not condemn Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea gave Moscow a purpose to celebrate that they 'won a moral and political victory' (The World's Post-Crimea Power Blocs, 2014).

Focusing on BRICS became a new geopolitical format for Russia in the ongoing confrontation with the West. Russia therefore tried to develop close ties with BRICS members and the countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as the Eurasian Economic Community. The BRICS members are a group of emerging market countries with real economic potential. Brazil is the largest Latin American state with a developed industry and agriculture. Russia is the world's largest supplier of hydrocarbons. China demonstrates sharp economic growth and India has huge intellectual resources. South Africa has enormous natural resources and a developed agricultural sector. The five BRICS countries had a combined GDP of US\$16.039 trillion that constitutes 20% of world GDP in 2013 (World Economic Outlook, 2013) and that number is projected to increase significantly in the years to come. Also, the five BRICS countries represent almost 3 billion people – about 40% of the world population.

Although the developing countries were marked by rapid economic growth, the US still had a clear advantage in GDP in 2013: according to the World Bank data, the US GDP was \$16.8 trillion, and China's GDP was \$9.2 trillion, that made about 55 percent of the US GDP (Table 1). The same source shows that Russia's GDP was \$2 trillion, which constitutes about 12.5 percent of US GDP in 2013 (World Bank, 2013).

The distribution of military power did not change drastically after the Cold War. The Table 1 shows that the US has maintained in 2013 its leading position in military capabilities: in 2013, US military spending was \$618.6 billion; whereas China's military expenditure was \$171.3 billion — about 27.7% of US' military spending. While being the only country possessing the comparable to US weapons of mass destruction, Russia has spent only about \$84.8 billion in 2013— about 13.7 % of US military spending (SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 1991-2013).

Furthermore the US continues to be among the leading states in the domain of information technologies. The US continues to be near the top of the list of countries of Internet users, even not the leading one anymore. According to the UN data, in 2013 the US had 84 percent of Internet users per 100 inhabitants, surpassed by UK – 89 percent; Germany – 83 percent and France – 81 percent. Other countries are following economically advanced countries: Russia had 61 percent; China 45 percent; South Africa 48 percent and India 15 percent of Internet users per 100 inhabitants (Internet users, 2013).

Although the distribution of power is changing in the last decades, the United States continued to enjoy a large margin of superiority over all other powers combined. The Figure 2 shows the distribution of power capabilities in 2013, and that US maintained the economic and military influence in the international politics. While the expressed dissatisfaction with the US leading position on the world stage, the distribution of power did not change substantially since 1991 and the US maintained the leading power capabilities.

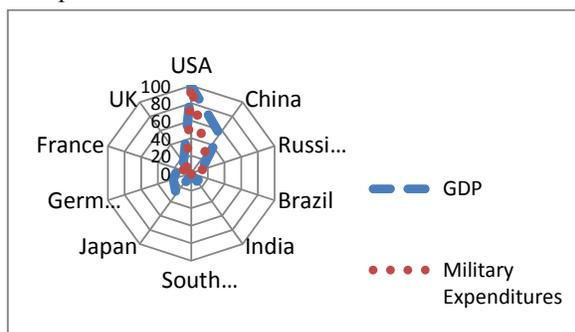


Figure 2. Power concentration in 2013

Sources: Compiled from data in Table 1.

The US, but also other developed countries have an advantage of widespread application of cutting-edge information technologies as well as the high quality of life and living conditions. While developing countries such as China and India are behemoths in physical size, they still have limited absorptive capacity and implementation of advanced information technologies. So far developing

countries have also limited influence in the existing international organizations. For example, of all the BRICS nations, only China and Russia are permanent members of the UN Security Council. Hence the BRICS nations are looking to make their voice heard and have sought more voting powers at the IMF and WB in the same time they are attempting to create their own financial systems.

Russia is now viewing the BRICS as a key component to assist in the creation of a new multipolar world, in the hope of transitioning from US hegemony to a polycentric world order and advancing its own role on the world stage. The ideology of the new international world order is not precisely detailed, but according to the Kremlin in a polycentric world “interference in countries’ internal affairs for the overthrow of unwanted regimes is unacceptable” (BRICS countries, 2014). However, in the last international affair initiative, as unilateral annexation of Crimea, Russia did not demonstrate the capacity to play according to the proclaimed norms and rules of relationship between states on the world stage.

In order for regional powers to be able to create a change in the power distribution on a global scale, they must translate their aggregate economic potential into the concrete military capabilities. The challenger must have power projection capabilities that can play in the same league as the superpower. Empirical data shows that Russia's ambitions are not matched with economic and military capabilities to change the distribution of power on the global stage.

CONCLUSIONS

The only country that has an exceptionally globalized position in the world system is the United States. America is unlikely to give up its leadership position as the superpower and center of gravity in the world. Although in the last years Washington took a more cautious approach to international affairs, the United States sees itself as the primary world leader. Washington views multipolarity as an intrusion to its unique status and prefers a multilateral approach characterized by a mobilization of the efforts of the international community under American leadership.

While Russia does not challenge the United States as the world leader, it does reject the principle of US global hegemony. Russia denied the principle of unipolarity to discard the US as hegemony and to diminish the role of America as superpower. Imposing the concept of multipolarity, Russia emphasizes its own importance on the world stage and status of equal among other developing state.

The Crimean crisis became an episode in the Russia-US relationship and an incident that expressed the disputes about the world order and the distribution of power on the global stage. The illegal unilateral annexation of Crimea is not an act of greatness, but an impulsive act of a desperate leader to make his voice heard. The Crimean crisis did not change the distribution of power on the global stage; the US maintains its leading position, but the discussions about multipolarity are continuing.

The concept of multipolarity includes a collective stability, which can be achieved through collaboration among the world's leading states with the support of

international institutions, most notably the United Nations, which would coordinate the norms of international conduct. This stability can be achieved by respecting the principles of international law and national sovereignty. The major players on the system level will have to learn the rules of the game of multipolarity and to play according to those norms.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alla Roșca, email: alla_rosca@yahoo.com

Dr. Alla Roșca is an Adjunct Professor at the Department of Political Sciences, Tulane University of New Orleans, LA, USA. Dr. Alla Roșca obtained her Doctoral Habilitation in Political Science from Moldova State University. She was the Fulbright Scholar at the University of New Orleans (2007) and Visiting Professor at Tulane University (2008). Dr. Roșca served as Chair of the Department of International Relations and Full professor of Political Science at Moldova State University. Alla was one of the founders of the NATO Information Center in Moldova. She has published two books and more than 50 articles.