

DOI: 10.24193/OJMNE.2023.42.02

THE LOGIC OF MULTILATERAL ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS: THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR CASE

Maxim ROZUMNY, PhD

University of Haifa, Israel

rozumnyi@gmail.com

Abstract: *One of the determining factors in the current system of international relations remains the de facto inequality of nations. This problem is key to the origins of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the world's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The international system today contains many connections and mediations, some of which are regulated, and others are informal. One of the common types of relations among actors in international politics is asymmetric relations, which are often friendly or of partnership but, under certain conditions, can become confrontational. The current conflict between Ukraine and Russia demonstrates how asymmetric relations become conflictual. In the example of this conflict, we also see that asymmetric relations form a whole complex of relations, which includes international actors at different levels – the Western community, Russia, Ukraine, and separatist entities supported by Russia in Ukraine. This situation is quite typical of several modern international conflicts. Its general logic is reproduced in various hot spots of the world. We propose to consider this model of relations as an example of a special kind of asymmetry – replicant asymmetry – when the same conditions and conflicts arise simultaneously at several hierarchical levels of international relations. The crisis possibility of replicant asymmetry is based on several motivational factors. Under certain conditions, they push the potential conflict on the escalation way. An increase in voltage or a rupture of one of the chains of replicant asymmetry automatically provokes a crisis in all other chains.*

Keywords: asymmetry, conflict, world system, Russia-Ukraine war

The current escalation of the existential conflict between Russia and the former USSR republic of Ukraine, which entered the phase of a full-scale military conflict on February 24, 2022, has put the issue of military security on the agenda of European politics as acutely as it can be imagined in post-war Europe. In her landmark Easter speech on April 27, 2022, the former British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss announced the "return of geopolitics" to the world agenda amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, to understand how the current geopolitics is the same as in the times of national liberation movements of the 19th century or clashes of hostile military-political blocs of the 20th century, we must take a closer look at the

characteristics of international politics and the specifics of their relations in modern circumstances.

One of the prerequisites for the transition of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict into an armed phase is the inequality of the economic, demographic and military potentials of the two countries, which gave the leadership of the Russian Federation reason to hope for an easy and quick success.

At the same time, several international relations researchers consider asymmetric relations to be more stable and less conflictual than symmetric ones. This ability of asymmetry to maintain the stability of the system of relations was noted by the founders of the theory of asymmetry in international relations. "...Asymmetry inevitably creates differences in risk perception, attention, and interactive behaviour between states, and it can lead to a vicious circle of systemic misperception. Despite such tensions, the international order is quite stable, and even asymmetric relations can rarely be forced by the stronger side." (Womack, 2004, p. 351).

Do asymmetric relations contain real crisis potential in the modern international system? What is the logic of the emergence and evolution of an asymmetric conflict, and which conditions provoke this evolution? We will try to answer these questions in this article.

Modern inequality of independent states

The inequality between an imperial metropolis and a former province (colony), which has taken the path of secession, is fundamental and obvious. However, such a struggle of the lesser against the greater and of the part against the whole is almost always successful in history. All empires have fallen apart, and none has yet been able to reverse the process.

Attempts at outright imperial revenge in the modern world are already quite rare. At the same time, inequality and dependence provoke conflicts in the modern world much more often than outright imperial ambitions.

Inequality in political science is traditionally considered destabilizing, which provokes, on the one hand, the stronger to use their power to subjugate the weaker and encourages the weaker to protest against the existing status quo factor (Beyer, 2014, p. 51).

The nature of the existing inequality and its causes are considered in various concepts of international relations. In particular, the most common classification of subjects of international

relations is the division of existing states into "great, middle, and small power". Researchers find this division in the works of Giovanni Botero, an Italian political thinker of the late 16th century. Leading academic institutions still use relevant academic classifications today (the University of Leicester, University of Nottingham, etc.)

It is quite convenient for assessing the potential influence and vulnerability of a state entity. However, it remains a purely formal feature that says nothing about a state's current place and role in the world, region, or in relations with another state.

It is also important to note that the modern world is not just a collection of "large, medium and small" states. Actors of international politics interact with each other within the framework of the global system of relations, which determines the place of each country and the form of its relations with other countries. Systematicity is an important characteristic of the sphere of international relations, as it is about the high integration of the globalized world and the significant mutual dependence of states.

The theory of systems (Bertalanffy) was most consistently applied to the field of international relations by representatives of the world-system approach (Wallerstein, 2004), which emphasizes the integral factors of world politics (economics, trade, and development). The proponents of this approach divide countries by belonging to the "core, semi-periphery and periphery".

The world-system theory mainly considers a country's participation in the world division of labor and its role in the global system of capitalism. However, it ignores most of political determinations such as political control, competition between global centers, and ambiguity of status (core, semi-peripheries or peripheries) that depend on the structure of existing unions and relations.

In the literature, the inequality among nations is considered in many contexts, but mainly in the context of asymmetry in international relations. The asymmetry of international relations stems from a certain inequality between nations and states, which natural objective or follows from the history and conditions of their relations.

Relations between large and small states and between core and peripheral countries, are asymmetric for purely objective reasons. Nevertheless, the concept of asymmetry is quite correct in defining a certain type of relationship. However, it says nothing about the nature and

causes of such asymmetry and ignores the systemic nature of relevant relations in the modern world, which is not a local phenomenon of relations between the two countries.

The functions of symmetrical or asymmetrical relations in the international system depend on what model of the world is currently functioning. It is suggested, in particular, that "the bipolar world predominantly forms symmetrical relations, the unipolar world is characterized by asymmetric relations, and the multipolar world – symmetric-asymmetric relations" (Perepelytsia & Subtelny, 2005, p. 25).

Theoretical reflection has not been widely provided on this issue. "Despite the prominence of asymmetry in empirical and theoretical arenas, however, asymmetry's significance is more often implied than explained" (Musgrave, 2019, p. 284).

Much more specific is, for example, the concept of patron-client relations, which was proposed during the most developed bipolar confrontation between East and West. Such relations are characterized as unequal but strong and mutually beneficial. They arise when one party cannot provide its security by military means but can be useful in securing the interests of the other, more influential and independent party.

The client plays a prominent role in patron's competition with its counterpart. The more advantage the patron gains over its competitor through its association with its client, the more the patron will value the relationship. For example, Cuba was one of the most valuable client for USSR just because its key role in the competition USSR-USA. "There is also a critical perceptual dimension to patron-client state relationships. This (perception – *M.R.*) is derived from a consistent association between the two states for a recognizable, if sometimes only brief, period of time" (Shoemaker, 1984, p. 13).

Today's connection between the so-called center and periphery is becoming more multichannel and multidimensional. The whole system is evolving to a dynamic balance by an increasing number of actors and the growing diversity of their interactions. The definition of international politics as "anarchy", which emerged during the period of stabilization of the confrontation between Eastern and Western blocs (Bull, 1977), although rightly criticized, also takes on a new meaning in the new circumstances.

However, one should also noted the growing interdependence between actors at different levels and positions in the international division of labor, which results from dynamic processes

of integration and disintegration at different levels of interaction (political, economic, ideological, value, etc.). This raises the question of the conformity of existing institutions and concepts to the new conditions of their functioning. "Globalization is not changing the current system, but highlighting its structural limitations" (Bisley, 2007, p. 207).

Crisis potential of asymmetry as an issue

An important area of study of asymmetric relations is also the study of their dynamics, and the potential for change, including their development in a crisis scenario.

Classic asymmetric relationships arise when one party has less opportunity to influence the partner than the other and is therefore cannot defend their interests in confrontation. Therefore, in asymmetric relations, the weaker side tries to avoid confrontation, including through certain concessions in its interests (Womack, 2015, p. 10).

The asymmetry of relations becomes especially evident in the growing conflict between states that, for one reason or another, have a fairly close relationship or affect each other's interests. Such conflicts are becoming a significant tension factor in the respective regions or at the global level.

Thus, the former symmetrical confrontation between the USSR and the USA was replaced by asymmetric relations between the USA and the Russian Federation, which have entered a state of confrontation in recent years. Russia's relations with the countries of the former Soviet Union are also asymmetric. Moreover, in the case of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia, this asymmetry is mostly peaceful and even friendly, then in the case of Estonia, Lithuania, and Georgia, this type of relationship is rather hostile. The current status quo does not suit both sides, albeit for different reasons.

Sometimes reversals in asymmetric relationships occur quite suddenly. Thus, close and friendly asymmetric relations between the United States and Iran became sharply hostile since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Meanwhile, almost every hot spot in the world where the flames of actual or potential conflict are burning focuses on the asymmetry of relations between actors of different levels. At the same time, an asymmetric confrontation at one level of relations usually provokes tension and conflict in several areas of international relations. The situation is complicated because such

conflicts involve not only traditional states but also supranational structures and subnational entities.

The asymmetric conflict between Turkey and Cyprus has led to the formation of a third actor to this confrontation, the unrecognized Turkish Cypriot state. The Sunni majority of Arab states have a resource advantage over Shiite Iran but have been forced to oppose Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria for many years.

In this context, we can also mention the recent confrontation between the EU and the UK, on the one hand, and the related tensions between the UK and Scotland, on the other. Serb minorities, formed as self-governing communities in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, remain a factor in the instability of these Western Balkan countries, affecting not only regional security but also the overall context of the West-East confrontation.

Signs of asymmetric confrontation, which acquired a systemic character and went beyond bilateral relations, can be traced in several cases of interaction on the world scene.

The confrontation over the status of Taiwan, which intensified simultaneously with the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, has clear analogies. Despite significant differences in the legal, historical, and cultural background of these conflicts, their logic of emergence and development has significant similarities. There was a period of relative stabilization in the interaction within the USA – China – Taiwan triangle, during which, however, the mutual dependence and inequality of the partners was not eliminated. The inclusion of communist China in the capitalist world-system brought significant benefits to both the United States and the People's Republic of China. Mutual restraint in relations between Beijing and Taipei has also been beneficial for all parties. The US hold to the principle of "one China", while Beijing did not threaten the former island province with force.

The balance began to collapse simultaneously on all levels. The asymmetry in relations with America ceased to suit the Chinese and, approximately, since 2008, the rhetoric and actions of official Beijing have become increasingly ambitious and confrontational. At the same time, after the economic upheavals of 2008, the US took a course to restrict the access of Chinese goods and investments. Over the past decade and a half, relations between the two countries have entered a phase of global confrontation. As a result, stability in relations between Beijing and Taipei was also disturbed and almost reached the point of armed conflict.

Similar processes are unfolding in complex relations in the Middle East, which traditionally have a significant crisis potential. Asymmetric relations of the USA with Israel, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia have a different political and economic determinations, were formed and developed in different historical conditions, but some of them have their projections at lower levels:

Israel – Palestinian Authority (FATAH) – Hamas

Pakistan – Afghanistan – Taliban

Turkey – Kurds.

With the growth of the global influence of the PRC, new pyramids of asymmetric relations started forming also in the zone of Beijing's dominance, for example, China – Pakistan – Afghanistan (Taliban).

Putin's attempt to challenge the West is accompanied not only by a crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations but also by increasing tension in the entire post-Soviet space. The conflict in West-Russia relations is reflected in others relations:

Ukraine – Crimea

Georgia – Abkhazia&South Ossetia

Moldova – Transnistria

Azerbaijan – Nagorno-Karabakh.

Thus, asymmetric today is not just particular to bilateral relations between countries. Asymmetric is the very structure of international relations that emerged and were established in the postwar world order, which was followed by the decolonization and the formation of new ties and dependencies between elements of the capitalist world system.

The concept of replicant asymmetry

Our basic hypothesis is that we can identify certain relatively stable constructions of hierarchical dependencies and vertically-oriented confrontations in the structure of modern international relations, which play the role of balances and instruments of self-regulation in the world system. Such constructions also can be identified as a source of crisis dynamics and various threats.

The circumstances of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and how it evolved allow us to build a model of relations that led to this conflict. On the one hand, this model is hierarchical, as it includes subjects of different levels of international politics, but at the same time, it has signs of reversible dependence from the higher levels of the hierarchy to the lower. This construction is also characterized by structural isomorphism, which considers each subject as containing features of the subject of the higher level and replicates the same features on the subject of the lower level.

This type of asymmetry contains a certain symmetry – the symmetry of relationships, not subjects. Subjects differ in their influence and the nature of their interests, but they become elements of a system in which the same type of relationship is reproduced at different levels of interaction between these elements.

From now on, we would call this type of relationship replicant asymmetry.

The origins of this complex positioning of the actors of the world system lie in the historical, cultural, ideological, and institutional dimensions of the system. The detailed study of the phenomenon of replicant asymmetry would be a matter of considerable interest to many fields of study. However, in the context of problems in international politics, the fundamental conditionality of this kind of relations should be noted for the system of international relations. We emphasize that this is not a simple hierarchy (a stepped dependence of lower levels from the higher) but a fundamentally new, dynamic, fairly stable construction of the international political space, reflecting some hidden mechanisms of formation and self-reproduction of the whole system.

Replicant asymmetry exists as a real dependence of subjects on each other and can lead to potential conflict produced by their mutual status. It differs from classical colonial dependence in its multilevel ties and the presence of both direct and inverse and "cross" connections, which arise between subjects of different levels "over the head" of the nearest dominus.

The current state of the world-system produces replicant asymmetric connections to balance it and maintain it in a state of dynamic equilibrium. These relationships are tense and have significant crisis potential, but they can be quite resilient, as they operate on a balance of interests and threats to all involved.

The phenomenon of replicant asymmetry needs to be studied in the context of security studies as one of the key factors of stability. This phenomenon is also of great interest to studying of world-system connections and the dynamic factors of global politics.

Ukrainian-Russian case and the replicant asymmetry concept application

In the context of asymmetric relations, in our opinion, we should consider the specific conflict between Ukraine and Russia, which has become one of the serious challenges not only to European security but also to the stability of the international relations system as a whole.

An essential characteristic of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which entered the stage of open war on February 24, 2022, is its asymmetric nature.

The conflict's asymmetric nature, in this case, is a consequence of asymmetric relations in the previous period. The resistance that Ukraine demonstrated in 2022 is a sign of its acquisition of full-fledged subjectivity, and therefore, of overcoming the unequal nature of asymmetric relations that connected the two countries in the past. So this asymmetric conflict is a form of escape from asymmetric relations of dependence for Ukraine and a way to preserve these asymmetric relations for Russia.

Therefore, the whole period of fierce ideological, political, and since 2014 armed confrontation between Kyiv and Moscow, for the Ukrainian side, could be appropriately to describe as the War for Independence, which entered its decisive phase in 2022.

However, the goals of the participants in the conflict are rapidly changing. The changes in mutual status has been realized as irreversible by both sides since certain moment. That is why the former metropolis is now trying to cause as much damage as possible to its former province, by all means, to reduce its territory, economic and military potential, and limit its political subjectivity and its independence in foreign and domestic policy.

The collapse of empires is one of the cross-cutting themes of the history of civilization. Both the former provinces (colonies) struggle for their independence and the resistance of the imperial center and attempts to restore imperial unity have occurred many times in history and have been accompanied by large-scale bloody conflicts. Memories of violence in Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia are still fresh in Europe.

Today, we are witnessing the actualization of the logic of the transition of asymmetric relations to the stage of open conflict and the multiplication of this conflict in other problem areas of international relations. Some are even talking about the risk of starting a new World War.

Asymmetric Ukrainian-Russian relations entered a zone of turbulence after Ukraine's internal political crisis in 2004 when pro-Russian candidate Yanukovich clashed with pro-Western candidate Yushchenko during the presidential campaign. The civil unrest that became known across the world as the Orange Revolution marked an insurmountable conflict between the desire of the majority of Ukrainian society to strengthen state sovereignty, liberal reforms, and European civilizational choices and the opposite course to restore Soviet imperialism adopted by the Kremlin. This course of Russian leadership could eventually be supported by part of the population of Ukraine. That is why the Kremlin decided to start struggling to regain its control over Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries as well.

At that time, a broader structure of replicant asymmetry was formed around Ukrainian-Russian relations, involving both external actors (the Euro-Atlantic community) and domestic actors in Ukrainian politics at the subnational level. With the escalation of the contradiction between Moscow's intention to restore the empire and Kyiv's desire to preserve its independence and join the West, this structure evolved into an imbalanced state and began to disintegrate.

So, in the case of the current Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, which started at the end of 2013, we see a whole system of asymmetric relations, the structure of which resembles a Russian "Matryoshka doll" (or similar Chinese and Japanese dolls).

Such a model of relations included the following subjects of the world system: the West, Russia, Ukraine, and Crimea.

The crisis probability of replicant asymmetry type of relations is based on a several motivational factors. Under certain conditions, they push the potential conflict to escalation.

Difference and dependence are the characteristics of the relationship that form a constant (or periodic) desire for a lower-level subject to change the status quo, to break the "unnatural" partnership, and finally form a more "natural" one with a higher-level subject. When certain threats stimulate such motivation, we usually see strong and rather unexpected reactions, such as the identification of the West with the scarecrow of "fascism" in the minds of Russians, the

willingness of protesters in Kyiv to die for "European integration", the desire of Crimean pensioners "to die in Russia", and also the blue-yellow Ukrainian national flag in the hands of Crimean Tatar activists (which means a significant risk for them in the "Russian Crimea").

As early in 2022, the President of the Russian Federation defined the war in Ukraine as Russia's struggle for its existence, for the right to be Russia (Putin, 2022).

For Putin, it is clear that his country's "right to be itself" actually means his right to remain in power for life. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize a shift in Russian propaganda from the local goal of the "special operation" in Ukraine to the scale of the so-called "civilizational" confrontation between Russia and the West. It happened less than a month after the start of hostilities. Then the axis of asymmetric Russia-West confrontation was articulated as the main one for the Russian establishment three months after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Trenin, 2022).

Using the categories of life and death emphasizes the existential nature of the actors' motivations, their connection with the basic structures of identity, and the matter of instinct of collective self-preservation. Thus, it is not a question of fictional entities or situational categories of self-determination but of a serious conflict that has large-scale social consequences in the case of its "detonation". The cases of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Bosnia, the Gaza Sector, and the territories controlled by Boko Haram in Africa have provided many examples of this kind of crisis worldwide.

An increase in voltage or a rupture of one of the chains of replicant asymmetry automatically provokes a crisis in all other chains. At the same time, the crisis that arises at lower levels of the relation (sub-national and national) is usually easily removed from the political agenda by higher-level actors if the breakup is not part of their current intentions. For example, that happened during the 1995 Crimean crisis, when Russia was busy suppressing Chechnya's independence and did not support Meshkov's separatist uprising in Crimea.

On the other hand, the lower levels have virtually no alternative to counter the crisis scenario if a corresponding gap emerges at the higher levels.

The case of Crimea, and later Donbas, clearly shows that regional identity detonates under the influence of external factors. Vertical relations (centre-region, metropolis-colony) can be in a state of latent tension for a long time, but if they have been stabilized according to certain

principles of coexistence, they go into open conflict only in an extraordinary situation. Ancient and modern history is full of such examples.

The "Spring of the Nations" in the Habsburg Empire in 1848 was only part of the socio-political changes associated with the emancipation of entire classes and influential social groups. It is difficult to imagine the Russian Revolution of 1917, which led to the emergence of newly independent states, without the defeats at the warfront and the institutional crisis of the monarchy. The Chechen independence movement of the 1990s was based not only on the precedent of the collapse of the USSR but also came as a result of the deportation of the Chechen people after WWII.

An external factor in the relationship of replicant asymmetry is almost always the conflict of higher-level entities, which is projected onto the behaviour of the lower-level entity. One can argue that what marked the start of a new round of Russia's confrontation with the West – was a revanchist turns in the policy of the Russian leadership (2002-2003) or the color revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. However, the new delimitation was officially declared in Putin's 2007 Munich speech. Furthermore, the next escalation of the conflict around Ukraine's signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013 was originally determined by the logic of restoring the realities of the Cold War.

Significantly, the Ukrainian political elite and the majority of Ukrainian citizens were unaware of the scale and severity of the confrontation almost until the beginning of the armed conflict.

Until the end of November 2013, the country's leadership continued to bid on the condition of economic integration and the provision of credit from the EU. President Yanukovich had been considering the situation as a kind of "auction", selling his loyalty according to the logic of the *patron-client* (Shoemaker) relationship.

Most Ukrainians also saw no reason for a conflict with the former metropolis. All opinion polls still showed the positive attitude of Ukrainians toward Russia and Russians (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2015).

Meanwhile, the Russians are deteriorating their attitude towards Ukrainians precisely in the context of growing hostility against the West. Russia's public opinion "entered" a state of conflict before the situation in Ukraine entered a crisis phase. The Russian propaganda machine

prepared its internal audience for the apocalyptic scenario in Ukraine and acted as a donor of tension and violence inside Ukrainian society.

The projection of Russia's perception of reality into starkly opposed categories, i.e., "our's own – another's", "we-fascists", and "defeat-victory" applied to the internal political conflict in Ukraine was an additional destabilizing factor of Ukrainian crisis 2014. These applications stimulated fear and hate in Ukrainian society which broke the peaceful existence and ideological inertia of this country that lasted all 22 years of independence. Moreover, only at this stage was the real source of aggression finally identified by the collective mind, which formed a powerful anti-Russian trend in Ukrainian society.

The reaction of rejection was formed in the process of the conflict itself unfolding. Furthermore, if at the end of 2013, the concept of "European choice" stood for most Ukrainians in the context of modernization (and did not contradict maintaining the status quo in relations with Russia), it became synonymous with the war for independence within a year. It meant the war against Russian control.

This war brought Russia's followers in Crimea and Sevastopol a new reality. According to sociological studies of the previous period, the number of principal opponents of the peninsula's belonging to Ukraine in the pre-crisis period in this region amounted to 25% (Rating Group, 2011).

Therefore, when Russia and Ukraine were at peace, the Crimean people adhered to the status quo. However, with the onset of open conflict, the identity of its pro-Russian population began to evolve rapidly in the direction of incompatibility with the recognition of Ukrainian jurisdiction. At least such a mechanism was envisaged by the tactic of annexation of Crimea, implemented by the Russians in March 2014.

The new political face of Crimea and its inclusion in the logic of the war on the side of Russia has aroused a sharp reaction from the Crimean Tatars.

Previously, after repatriation from Central Asia, the community of Crimean Tatars became almost adapted to the system of checks and balances that emerged between Kyiv, Simferopol, and Moscow. The conflict with pro-Russian residents of Crimea has entered a latent phase and did not tend to grow. However, when the status quo in Crimea had been violated the peaceful mode of the Crimean Tatar presence on the peninsula changed immediately.

Ukraine's removal from the system of replicant asymmetry leaves this group alone with the pro-Russian community of Crimea and Russia definitely as the successor to the repressive policies of the USSR and the former Russian Empire against Crimean Tatars. In these conditions, the active part of the Crimean Tatar community has mobilized and has demonstrated the same reaction of rejection that we have seen before in relations Russia-West, Ukraine-Russia, and Crimea-Ukraine.

An interesting pattern is observed in the evolution of the most significant phenomenon in crisis story – the Donetsk separatism. The appearance of the Donetsk separatism is not recorded in the political history of independent Ukraine. It was not recognized by sociology surveys until early 2014. However, from 2012 to 2014 the number of supporters of the separation of Donbas from Ukraine (similar to the western Ukrainian province Galicia) increased from 2% to 8% (Rating Group, 2014), which indicates not the emergence of a separate "nation of Donbas", but the growing political polarization within Ukrainian society and reducing of the possibility of compromise.

The Donetsk and Luhansk separatists emerged in an organized manner, according to a scenario tested in 2004 by the pro-Russian politicians of Ukraine at the Congress of Deputies in Severodonetsk. This separatism was nothing more than a form of political blackmail in the face of the group's potential loss of power in Kyiv. This time, the separatist scenario was prepared and directed by the Russian propaganda machine and Russian security services (FSB and the military intelligence GRU). The representatives of the Yanukovich regime played a subordinate role in its implementation.

The formation of these pseudo-republics took place against a wave of maximum emotional arousal and open panic among the population of the region, which assessed political events in Kyiv through the prism of Russian TV channels in the context of the above-mentioned semantic constructions of "we vs fascists" and "victory-defeat". The case of Crimea, which was easily annexed by Russia, played an important role in the emergence of separatist projects. Therefore, the proclamation of "independence" by the political opponents of the new government in Kyiv was perceived as a temporary, mostly imitative act.

Under these conditions, the organization "Donetsk People's republic", which emerged a few years before the conflict as a marginal group of several people and had no political

representation or public support, was suddenly accepted as a basic political project and began to shape the way of behaving and thinking of local elites and active masses. The “Lugansk People’s republic” as an organization did not exist at all until 2014, and sociology has never recorded the phenomenon of "Luhansk separatism" in Ukraine.

Thus, Donbas has never been part of the system of replicant asymmetry associated with the relations between the West, Russia, and Ukraine, but it has become an element of it, replacing Crimea in this role. With the advent of this element, the system regained a chance to restore its stability and move the conflict from an exacerbation stage to a remission stage.

The thawing of the conflict at the initiative of Russia in 2022 has led to a new escalation of tensions at all levels of asymmetric confrontation.

Who will win in the asymmetric confrontation between Ukraine and Russia? The theory of asymmetric relations warns against precise predictions on this issue. “Power asymmetries that favour the stronger state are often combined with asymmetries that favor the weaker one: disparities in intensity of interests, externalities with regard to other relationships, and information about the workings of the other state tend to favor the weaker member of the dyad more often than naïve expectations would suggest” (Musgrave, 2019, p. 284).

In addition, including the two countries in a multilevel system of asymmetric relations encourages consideration of the development of this conflict within the logic of the model of replicant asymmetry.

The crisis in the system of relations based on replicant asymmetry can develop according to three scenarios: a) return to the status quo; b) loss of one of the elements of replicant asymmetry; c) the collapse of the entire system of relations.

Scenarios are ranked according to the degree of probability. Most crises end with the restoring the status quo (for example, Ukrainian-Russian relations in the period 2005-2013). If one of the elements of the system "falls out", it is replaced by another element that has not yet had the appropriate self-determination or had a different positioning (examples – Donbas instead of Crimea in Ukraine, Gagauzia instead of Transnistria in Moldova). Precedents for the complete breakdown of the chain of replicant asymmetry are rare in the modern world. They are associated with the consequences of large-scale conflicts or other civilizational changes (for example, Central Europe in the postwar period, postcolonial West Africa, etc.).

Are there potential scenarios for Ukraine's "falling out" of the asymmetric pyramid – which means its complete withdrawal from Russia's sphere of influence? Yes, they exist, but only if the West takes full responsibility for Ukraine, just as Russia did in the case of the "withdrawal" of Crimea from Ukraine. In that case, we might see a new system of replicant asymmetry, in which the United States, the European Union, and perhaps some autonomous entity inside Ukraine would become the chains of new relations.

Instead, asymmetric relations between Russia and, for example, Kazakhstan, would probably lead to the emergence of a new political actor such as the Russian-speaking autonomy movement of North Kazakhstan.

Conclusion

The concept of asymmetry in international relations is relevant to the nature of interaction between modern states, both in partnership and in confrontation mode. At the same time, this concept only partially describes unequal interaction.

Asymmetry mostly indicates the inequality of potentials and the difference in the interests and strategies of the actors in international politics. A wide range of accompanying phenomena and circumstances forming asymmetric interaction belong to the sphere of integral characteristics of politics. Integrity and interdependence are its key characteristics, which gives reason to consider the phenomenon of asymmetric relations as an important part of the world system.

Asymmetry today is not just particular bilateral relations between countries. Asymmetry is an important part of the structure of international relations that emerged and was established in the postwar polarization, decolonization, and full-scaled global transformations of the 1990s and 2000s.

Actors in international politics are traditionally ranked, depending on their influence, into large, medium, and small states. The world-system approach also operates with the concepts of world core, periphery, and semi-periphery. The relationship between these spheres is mediated by a significant number of asymmetric connections that form a complex mechanism of balances and dependencies.

Asymmetric interactions and relations that arise between actors at different levels of this system form entire chains of dependencies. In this chain, the same nature of relations is reflected from one level to another. Such a phenomenon can be called replicant asymmetry. Not only independent states but also certain autonomies, minorities, and other non-state actors become participants in these relations and interactions.

Some pyramids of asymmetric interaction formed historically; others became the result of situational alliances. These structures differ from traditional international alliances because of unequal relations between their elements. Replicant asymmetry also differs significantly from traditional vassalage because its structure is dynamic and its elements are largely autonomous. Mutual obligations in this system are mostly conventional and temporal.

Under certain conditions, the dynamics of replicant asymmetry become confrontational. Usually, this happens when one or more elements of the system cease to be satisfied with the status quo. Since all levels of asymmetric dependence are potentially conflictual, a crisis in one of its elements is immediately projected onto another.

Tensions that arise at lower levels of replicative asymmetry tend to be moderated by higher-level actors, unless they are conflict-minded. However, a conflict arising at higher levels of interaction is inevitably projected to lower levels. Then, voltage induction occurs at all levels of interaction, which can lead to certain elements falling out of the system or to its complete destruction.

Studying the immanent logic of the formation and development of asymmetric relations and the risks of destabilization they contain is a promising area of research in national security and international relations. The conclusions drawn from such research would help to more convincingly understand the Russia-Ukraine conflict and its perspectives for the future.

Considering asymmetric relations in the context of the stability of the existing system of international relations, the sources of its dynamics, and the risks of destabilization opens opportunities for a more accurate and adequate assessment of the driving forces of modern history.

It can also be assumed that the patterns and causal links found in this conflict will be productive for studying other specific conflicts of our time that go beyond the traditional

understanding of the causes of conflicts due to territorial claims, national irredentism, or ideological/religious incompatibility.

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