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A New Brezhnev Doctrine Has Eclipsed the UN

By Nikolai Zlobin

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Despite their outward dissimilarities, recent events in Libya and Japan raise the same questions about how the world is progressing and what constitutes the most serious challenges to global stability and security. Most important is the question of how to restructure international relations to move beyond Cold War thinking and to meet today's challenges effectively.

It has long been necessary to implement radical reforms to the United Nations, the main organization of the world, or to replace it with something more modern and effective. It was created immediately after World War II and reflects the political realities and legitimate ambitions the victors held at that time. The main task of the UN was to address the global agenda during the Cold War. It was essentially dominated by the Soviet and U.S. agendas, and its main role was to legitimize the agreements reached between the two superpowers.

Speaking at a recent conference dedicated to the memory of former Soviet Foreign Minister

Andrei Gromyko, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said Gromyko — known in the West as "Mr. Nyet" — was in fact a true friend to the United States. Kissinger acknowledged that he and Gromyko trusted each other and often held informal talks before transferring negotiations to official channels. As a result, the two countries managed to prevent the Cold War from turning into open conflict at a time when their relationship was the axis of all international politics.

Today, this stabilizing axis in the world of politics is gone, and the United Nations remains the only organization that can make legitimate decisions regarding the fate of the global community and of individual states. But that is not happening. The new order that is appearing before our eyes not only entails a significant reduction in the role of former superpowers, but also the end of their monopoly on setting the international agenda. That agenda is now set mostly by small and medium-sized states and includes more regional concerns than global issues.

But those countries have little influence over major decisions at the international level. The most turbulent regions today — Africa, South America and the Arab world — have never had permanent representation or veto power on the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, Germany, Japan, India and Brazil all have enormous economies and yet their influence is not reflected in the UN in particular or in international affairs in general.

The result is that UN Security Council Resolution 1973 regarding Libya was not perceived as reflecting world opinion. It was so vague that efforts to implement it have created a stalemate and heated arguments among countries over how the coalition has interpreted the resolution. Each has its own agenda regarding Libya. The body of international law developed during the Cold War has once again reached an impasse and is unable to resolve a simple conflict between private and public interests. As a result, the UN has effectively sanctioned an updated version of the Brezhnev Doctrine of limited sovereignty.

But the alternative would have been even worse. It is not difficult to imagine what would have happened if the UN had ignored the demands of the Persian Gulf states, most of the Muslim world and Africa regarding the severe humanitarian and regional geopolitical problem that had developed in Libya. After all, those countries have no other vehicle than the United Nations for putting even a united position before the global community. Of course, they have other options for dealing with regional problems, but those approaches are fraught with a far greater risk of destabilization. In other words, it was impossible to ignore the situation in Libya and equally impossible to resolve it through the methods adopted by the UN Security Council.

Just before coalition forces started to bomb Libya, Japan was struck with a triple calamity. The global community was once again found unprepared. Having been relieved to let Japan cope with the problem alone, leading nations somewhat disingenuously praised the power of the Japanese economy and the stoicism of its people in dealing with the crisis on their own.

In the case of Libya, the task of resolving a regional problem was eagerly assumed by the international community, but in Japan, the job of eliminating the risk of radiation leaks that could easily affect bordering states was unceremoniously left to Japan to solve. What would have happened if a natural disaster had damaged nuclear reactors in several countries

simultaneously? And what if those countries were economically undeveloped, politically unstable and ruled by regimes hostile to the free flow of information?

Unfortunately for Japan, its natural disaster does not have political or military repercussions, and is therefore of less immediate interest to the international community. The Group of Eight and G20 also failed to respond to events in Japan by, for example, taking the logical step of creating some sort of global emergency response agency. In both Libya and Japan, the global community demonstrated its ineffectiveness and inability to set the proper priorities.

We can say with a high degree of confidence that Russia, the United States, China and the European Union will not go to war against one another. But all of the current international institutions are focused so much on preventing such a war that other pressing concerns get less attention. But the main threats today are unresolved territorial and regional problems, unstable regimes, natural disasters, international terrorism, failed states and the conflict between globalism and nationalism. These issues are priorities for small and medium-sized countries.

Major powers have responded by conducting an imitation foreign policy, failing to recognize the current realities and refusing to initiate the necessary reforms to the system of international relations. They know that in any new paradigm their influence will be greatly diminished. Sooner or later, however, each country will have to sacrifice something in order to save the rest of the world. Some form of compromise is inescapable.

But for now, the foreign policies of the major powers have shown that since the end of the Cold War they have lost the art of compromising with the rest of the world.

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