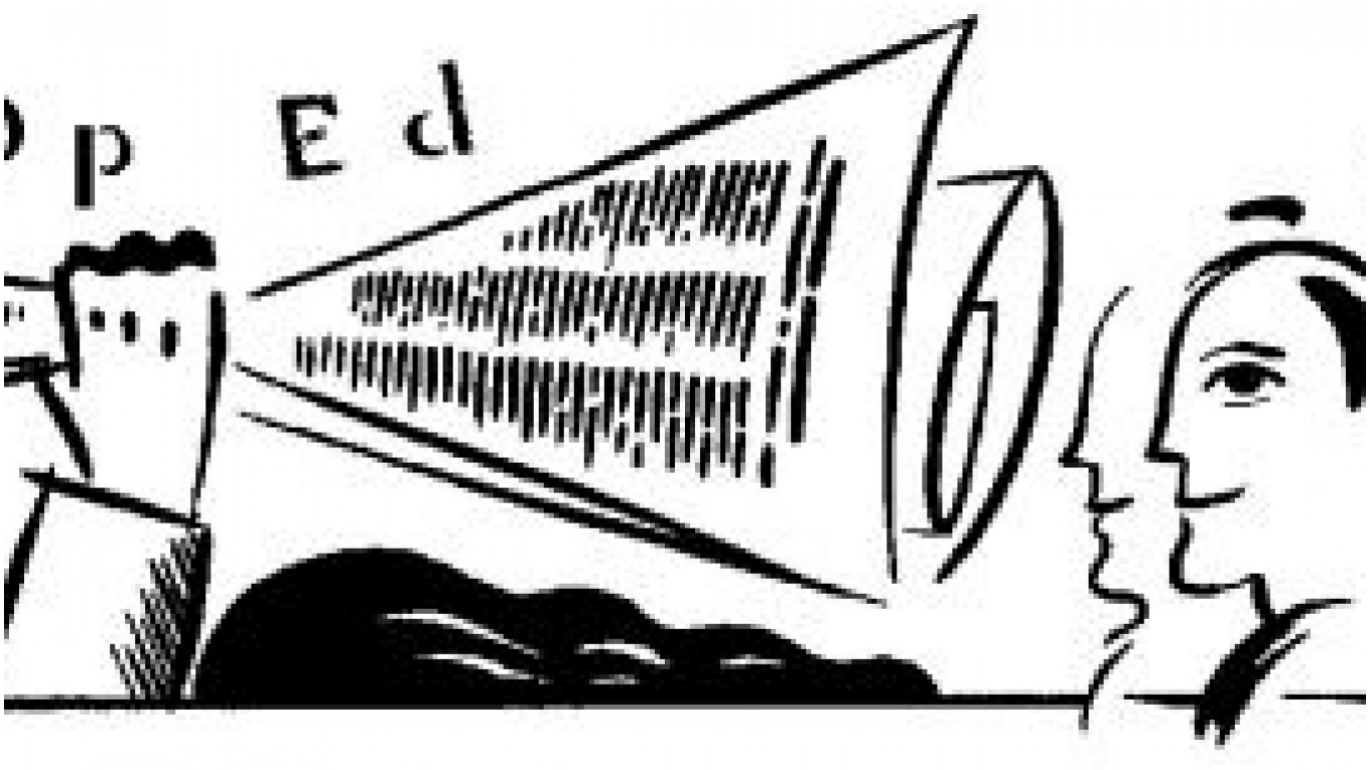
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West's Decline Will Play a Mean Trick on Russia

By Sergei Karaganov

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a thaw in many issues that had been frozen during the Cold War. The two countries dictated terms to states and societies, the Soviet Union generally taking a more heavy-handed approach, while the U.S. typically acted with more finesse. One example is when U.S. and Soviet leaders sealed a nuclear nonproliferation agreement that accepted their own nuclear arsenals but denied other states the same right.

There was also a flip side to this thaw. There was bloodshed and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia. Then war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan, conflict flared up in Transdniestr, and Russian forces fought in Chechnya. The West came down hard on the former Yugoslavia. Russia fought in Chechnya for almost a decade. Peace was imposed in Transdniestr. Some of the conflicts, such as that between Armenia and Azerbaijan, were again frozen with cooperative effort.

Other examples of that thaw were less prominent in the world political arena. Both Russia and the U.S. failed to stop India and Pakistan from obtaining nuclear weapons and thus

restarting the nuclear proliferation process.

Thankfully, the thaw was not all-encompassing. There are so many unconvincing arguments as to why the Soviet Union experienced the almost inevitable bloody civil war common to collapsing empires, but I will offer an explanation never cited by political analysts: Either God forgave Russia for the sin of communism and protected it from further suffering, or else it just got lucky.

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where nationalism and age-old animosities were strong, also got lucky. Both NATO and the European Union quickly accepted them with open arms and fast-track membership terms.

It would have been possible to breathe a sigh of relief had not what I call the "second thaw" occurred in the mid-2000s. This was not as much a result of the end of the bipolar world as it was of the weakening of the West.

History's first true globalization initially favored the West and then sparked explosive growth in states of the Asian periphery, which for 200 years had been reduced to poverty and weakness from being under the control of the West and subject to its laws and Cold War institutions.

The rise of a new Asia predictably gave rise to a host of nation-states, each with its own interests and phobias. The region also began implementing its own geopolitics in place of those that had been proposed — or imposed — from outside.

That process only exacerbated the West's decline after its dominance of the world for almost 500 years. That decline began with the reckless adventurism in Iraq and Afghanistan and gained momentum from the structural economic problems of the U.S. and EU that surfaced as a result of the economic crisis of 2008. But most important, they are evident in the failure of Western democracy to solve difficult structural problems.

Today, Europe is almost out of the picture entirely. In Asia, where it once dominated, not a trace of European influence remains. Europe tries to use nonmilitary means to demonstrate that it is still a player and gave its blessing to the democratic revolutions of the Arab Spring, even though the consequences of those events could prove disastrous for Europe. Sometimes it engages in collective military campaigns, such as in Libya.

Meanwhile, the U.S. is trying to contain China. Although Washington has retained much of its power, it has lost the ability to wield that power effectively, owing to economic difficulties, a split among its ruling elite and two failed military interventions. Up to now, most of those efforts have been symbolic. The old alliances such as NATO have either dissolved or are weakening. India calmly refused to enter into a union with the U.S. despite Washington virtually begging New Delhi to join.

An arms race, primarily involving naval forces, has begun in East and South Asia. Within the region, dozens of potential conflicts are shaping up, along with the very real tensions between India and Pakistan.

The West's exit from the region and China's rise, coupled with the lack of a collective regional

security structure, creates the prospect of a security vacuum in Asia that is becoming a growing concern. Even more alarming is the second thaw in the other Asia: the Greater Middle East. An almost hopeless security vacuum developed in the region after the Soviet collapse and Moscow's large loss of influence there. The vacuum was filled by Washington's hegemony over the region.

That weakening of external control has coincided with the fall of one dictatorship after another and has brought to the surface both old and new suspicions and religious differences that had accumulated during the years of foreign domination and hatred of West. The region has entered a period of war and social deterioration coupled with a rise of religious and national fanaticism.

The third major thaw, the potential collapse of the EU, would be indescribably terrible for the world as a whole and for Russia as well. The EU was created to bury the history of the state-sponsored nationalism that caused countless wars and led to two totalitarian states: the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Fear of communism provided a powerful impetus to the development of the EU. Now that communism is gone, the EU has lost much of its vigilance.

For now, Europeans have been fairly successful in implementing reforms in the eurozone, the foundation of European integration. But there is a growing radicalization of politics toward the left, the result of the inevitable decline in living standards. Calls for "more democracy" resound throughout Europe. This triggers an almost instinctive fear in me, reminding me of the Soviet-era slogan of the late 1980s that called for "more socialism."

Russia has a vital interest in seeing that the necessary European reforms succeed and that there is no collapse of European integration. We can ill afford a third thaw. Russia needs to find ways to help Europe. Moscow should resurrect its proposal to create a pan-European Union, a single economic and energy zone that would include Russia, its immediate neighbors and the EU. This kind of union could be one way to help the EU overcome its systemic crisis.

It's time Russia stop gloating over the weakening of the West, which will only lead to greater chaos and danger. If death knells are sounding for Europe, the same fate will assuredly await Russia as well.

The first thaw has already happened. The second is only beginning, and the numerous challenges and threats it entails must be controlled. A third thaw cannot be permitted.

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