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English Translation

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The administration of US President Joe Biden made a number of mistakes that the Kremlin will take advantage of in the war against Ukraine. In relations with Russia, the White House demonstrated weakness and tried to shift its responsibility to NATO partners. At the same time, the Ukrainian army amazed with its ability to resist Russia, but it still needs to get rid of the Soviet legacy. About this, as well as the interests of the Kremlin in the Middle East and Ukraine, the prospects of the Ukrainian army and the effectiveness of the Iron Dome in the current war with Russia, "Apostrophe" spoke with the former official under American President George W. Bush and the diplomat of the US State Department since the presidency Ronald Reagan DEBROY KEYGAN.

- Recently, the US rhetoric towards Russia has become a little softer. For example, the head of the White House, Joe Biden, refused to impose sanctions on Russia ...

- I would not say that he refused. He said that he was making the decision because he didn't wish to criticize Germany. And it seems very funny to me. Because this is actually an "operation under a false flag" (false flag is an attempt to hide one's responsibility for actions, to shift responsibility or blame onto others, - "Apostrophe").

There will be elections in Germany this year. Even if the Merkel Party can somehow lead the other parties, it is unlikely to have enough of a majority to win outright. As such they would have to form a coalition. And it is quite possible that these will be the German Greens - this is a very interesting pro-NATO, environmental, pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian party. Many of us believe that the Greens will take action once in office to try and shut down Nord Stream 2. In the meantime German entrepreneurs are making large sums of money from this pipeline, as it will be the entry control point into Europe. They are in a hurry to finish the pipeline so they can see immediate profits--the entrepreneurs are the people who make decisions on this gas pipeline and make money on it.

Biden also wants a return to the Iran nuclear deal, and Russia is a key player on this issue – and Biden wants a summit with Putin. And although he speaks very loudly about Putin and the problems that exist in Russia, many people in his administration want to return to better ties with Russia. What is interesting is that even if Donald Trump had the wrong idea about Putin, Ukraine and everything else, the people around him - like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or John Bolton – and Congress ensured that we imposed sanctions Russia and Ukraine received weapons for defense. This administration speaks very loudly about Russia, but does not take big steps. It is very disappointing.

I spoke recently with a friend of mine in Tbilisi, and he says there are rumors that Biden has promised to leave Nord Stream 2 alone if Putin withdraws his troops from Donbass. I think this is funny. I do not believe that Putin would agree to such a thing.

- Did I understand you correctly that the softening of the attitude towards Russia, the refusal to place two American ships in the Black Sea is preparation for the Biden-Putin summit?

- I think yes. And I think that the refusal to place ships in the Black Sea is no longer about diplomacy. That was just a terrible decision. A super power should never in any case, do this - to deploy ships to the region and then turn them around. For Russia, this was read as a huge indicator of America's weakness.

And this is not only about Ukraine. This is a terrible message to send to NATO Allies as well. What kind of message does the United States send to its NATO allies like Poland or Lithuania, which are Ukraine's biggest supporters? What is this signal? What was the signal for Nord Stream 2? That America is more worried about Germany than countries that struggle with Russian influence every day. As for me, this is just a disaster.

I am very disappointed with this administration for refusing to impose sanctions. There is no national security need for America to move away from sanctions.

This is why Nord Stream 2 and Turkish Stream were bad ideas. Because this is not so much about Ukraine and not at all about Germany - it is exclusively about Russia. 35-40% of the Russian economy depends on oil and gas. The reason why the Nord Stream 2 project is so awful is that as soon as it is completed and it starts working in tandem with Turkish Stream, 70% of Russian oil and gas and products of their processing, will be sold to the European market. Russia will receive money, and this will allow it to interfere in the elections in Georgia, continue to occupy Ukrainian territory and create problems in Ukraine, to continue its activities in Belarus, Syria, Libya, Transnistria and around the world, including its interference in European elections and the jailing of Navalny. All of this costs money and Nord Stream 2 will provide lots of money to Russia. Therefore, the decision not to impose sanctions was terrible - and its consequences go far beyond Ukraine.

- Putin constantly wants negotiations and division of the world into "spheres of influence". One of these zones is undoubtedly the Middle East. What is Russia's interest in this region?

- Many believe that Russia has only recently begun to interfere in the affairs of the Middle East - but this is not the case. Russian instructors and ground and naval military forces have been in Syria since the 1970s - at that time they were the Soviet military, they were stationed in the military bases of Tartus and Latakia. The Russians regularly supply weapons, rocket launchers, equipment, instructors to Syria and Lebanon through Hezbollah. And Russia has sent troops to Libya in an attempt to overthrow the UN-recognized government.

If Russia sees a vacuum, it fills it. It's like the law of physics. And when the Kremlin saw that US interest in the Middle East had weakened, they tried to fill this space. What happened in Syria was devastating and terrible. About 800,000 people were killed by the Assad regime during the massacre of civilians. But support for this regime, which is desperately seizing power, is not only provided by Iran - it is provided by Russia. Assad could not have used chemical weapons against his own people without the support of Iran and Russia.

- US Secretary of State Tony Blinken visited Israel at the end of May - as they say, to consolidate the truce between Israel and Palestine. In your opinion, will this trip preserve the peacekeeping endeavors or bring a solution to the conflict?

- To be absolutely honest, I will say that President Biden played little role in the conclusion of the current truce between Israel and Palestine. Traditionally, the US has played a role, but not this time. I think the purpose of Secretary Blinken's trip is to define the position of the United States as a key player in the region. And he will still be able to do something. The current administration has moved away from Donald Trump's policies in the region and many countries are now unhappy, because a lot of really good things have been done there under Trump. And America faces a difficult road to regain its key importance in the region. Because the void that formed during the first few months of the current presidential administration has allowed other players, such as Russia and Iran, to intervene in a large number of cases that America has missed.

I have known Mr. Blinken for a very long time and have deep respect for him. And sending him to the region is a smart move. However, I think that the Biden administration has shown weakness, and no one in the region took the appearance of the previous person first sent out by President Biden, seriously.

- What about Iran and Israel?

- Now we are talking about the elephant in the room. This is Iran. Tehran is a tremendous help to Hamas and Hezbollah. Tehran has long dreamed of dominating the entire Levant region, which will include Lebanon, which, under the ineffective leadership of Hezbollah, has become one of the most destitute and economically gutted countries in the middle east. Russia supports Iran in Syria. And Russia has been supplying weapons to Hamas for decades and this is no secret.

Iran is a country that encourages these wars against Israel and Iran benefits from any global protests and attacks against Israel. Iran believes there is no place for Jews in the Middle East. And this is a big problem both for Israel and for any country in the Middle East where Jews live. And while he and his "proxy" like Hamas are a threat to Israel's existence, we will not see peace in the region and there will be no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Because we need to talk about resolving the issue between three countries, not two.

The United States and Western Europe want the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be resolved between the two countries, so that "the two peoples live in peace and harmony." But Palestinians refuse to recognize Israel's very right to exist, so how there be a solution between the two countries. The United States is now promoting a scenario for resolving the conflict, with which a huge part of the people in the Middle East do not agree. And I don't think the agreement will work.

What I have heard from Palestinians and others in the region alike is that the infighting among the Palestinian authority and Hamas is as strong as between Hamas and Israel. The Palestinian Authority cancelled the elections because it feared that Hamas will defeat the head of the Palestinian National Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, on its own territory - in the West Bank of the Jordan River. In addition, the struggle is between various Hamas leaders, between the West Bank and Gaza. The world community sees only the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians, but this is not the case.

- Putin said that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is taking place "directly on the borders of Russia." When he talked about Syria like that, he sent his troops there. Do you expect large-scale involvement of the Russian military in the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation?

- I think that the Russian troops in Syria are not occupation troops. As I said, there are "military advisers," as the Kremlin calls them, but there are also soldiers. Since the times of the Soviet Union, their number has been increasing or decreasing. Now there are more of them.

But no - I do not believe that Russia wants to send more of its ground military units to Gaza and thus increase instability. Hamas uses modifications based on Russian weapons supplied to it via Iran. And I would not be surprised if there were some Russian military instructors working with Hamas. But I suspect most Russian support is funneled through Iran and via Syria. The Kremlin will continue to work this through Iran to avoid direct confrontation with Israel. Therefore, no, I don't believe Moscow put forces into Gaza.

- It seems to me that the United States should try more than anyone else to find a solution to the conflict with Iran, since Israel is their closest ally in the Middle East - and now it is in a difficult position.

- To be very honest with you, all this aggravation happened only because Hamas and Iran, which supports it, were clearly convinced that the Biden administration would not do anything. But Biden made many, I would say, huge mistakes. The first was the return to the Vienna format of negotiations with Iran on a return to the nuclear deal, which is very, very uncertain. Even the International Energy Agency has recently admitted that Iran hid many facets of its program from inspectors, I would call it cheating. They built underground uranium enrichment plants and produced uranium enriched up to 60%. And now the US is returning to negotiations with Iran. And this allows Tehran - and more importantly, Moscow -

to conclude that the United States will do anything to return to this agreement. And it is never a good thing when you send your opponents a signal that you are ready to do anything.

And by taking such steps, Washington completely undermined its ability to do something against Hamas. It's like with the decision of the Biden administration not to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2 - this is something that affects the interests of Ukraine. And this is a really big problem. Because this is more than about Ukraine and Germany - this is about Russia. And the Kremlin sees it. And there, just like in Hamas, they will think that if the United States does everything that Iran wants to conclude an agreement, then we can also get favorable conditions for us. Strategically, the United States has now created a door that Russia, Iran and Hamas only have to push to open.

When the United States shows weakness to Iran or Russia, both of these countries will definitely take advantage of it.

- I read an expert's opinion on the Internet that support for Hamas is such a "symmetrical response" from the United States in support of Ukraine. Do you agree with that?

- Your expert is partially right, but with one caveat - the situation does not concern Ukraine. Doesn't apply to Ukraine at all. Traditionally, Russia sees itself as a great power opposing the United States. This view was prevalent in Soviet times and it never disappeared from Putin's mind. Sometimes, when Putin needs a certain strategic goal, he goes somewhere and just takes the opposite position to the interests of the United States. And that's enough for him.

If he can create chaos, doubt, anxiety, this is all a plus for him. Therefore, we are not talking about Ukraine - the situation with Israel predates the invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. If we look back decades, we see that no matter what position the United States takes, Russia will take the opposite. Therefore, your expert is only partially correct.

I will return to your previous question - you said that Putin believes that the conflict between Israel and Palestine is happening just under his nose (in the Russian backyard - "backyard" - "Apostrophe"). For Russia, the rest of the world is "under the nose." Venezuela is under his nose, Cuba is under his nose, Nicaragua is under his nose. I think Putin needs to learn geography in order to understand where that "nose" ends. And you know about the official position of the United States -

that they do not recognize the invasion of Ukraine, attempts to influence the elections in Georgia; what is happening in Belarus and with Lukashenka; Putin's right to keep troops in the Dnieper region to influence Moldova. This is not something with which the US agrees. But the US government has also been tentative with its response to most of these issues.

- There is an opinion that Beijing also has its own interest in the Middle East. In your opinion, can Russia compete with China?

- This is a very good question. There is an opinion in Washington and Kiev that Russia and China will fight in the region for influence over it. This is not true. Everything happens differently. The bottom line is that Russia cannot compete with China in terms of money. There is simply no such amount of money in Russia that it could spend on other countries the way China approaches these countries.

What is China doing in the region? They come and provide the country with the help it really needs - especially now, due to the economic losses during the pandemic. For example, he says to Israel - we will help you with the equipment in this port - and gives a loan for this at 400%. And then, when it becomes clear that the country cannot repay this loan, China says - instead of money, we will use equipment in your port or take over the entire port. They have already tried to do this in Greece and Cyprus. And they have already done this in Ethiopia, and in some other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Therefore, Russia is trying to spread its influence with the help of "hard power" and energy - the Kremlin has two options. And China does it differently, it does not launch rockets and does not fire cannons. It spreads influence through money and such "aid", and collects territories that countries cannot fight for in order to reclaim them. Therefore, Beijing and Moscow are competing in the region, but I do not think they will start a conflict over this. And China will never send its troops, as Russia did to Syria and Libya.

“The Ukrainians were amazed at the capabilities of the Israeli Iron Dome system. According to Defense Minister Andrei Taran, Kiev may buy an anti-missile defense system that resembles the Iron Dome. But social networks laughed at this - the Ukrainian army is still not fully equipped with thermal imagers, night vision devices and other necessary equipment. Do you think Ukraine needs its own Iron Dome?

- If some system is effective during one conflict, this does not mean that it will be effective in another. The Iron Dome has a specific purpose. It would come in handy if someone in the Donbass was launching rockets into cities. But although "Iron Dome" looks "sexy", now is not the case and not the time. Remember also that it is 50-70% effective and many missiles hit the target.

I think that for Ukraine the best long-term investment would be to increase its presence at sea. Ukraine also needs more armored weapons. But first of all, ships that could, for example, control the Kerch Strait. Ukraine needs those high-speed boats that the United States delivered to Ukraine. If we talk about countermeasures, then an integrated air defense system, but the Iron Dome is not what Ukraine needs, not for this type of war. Your country is not experiencing such powerful air attacks.

“Everyone knows that the Israeli army is well trained and very patriotic. Can you advise how we can get the same army?”

- Israel has been in a difficult situation for a very long time. There is such a misconception that they are able to defend themselves for so long because of the large financial assistance from the United States. But let me explain. "US military aid" is very specific items that you usually have to buy from American companies. That is why people say, "Israel is getting American money," but that money is being used to buy American equipment. This equipment is immediately field-tested - American manufacturers can see how it works, can immediately make improvements - and thus make even more money.

We have a special relationship with Ukraine. Ukraine receives special equipment. Moreover, Ukraine is facing something that Israel has never faced - the legacy of the Soviet "military". We understand very well that it is very difficult to change the behavior of people, which has been formed for decades.

I have been cooperating with Ukraine for several decades - and this is what I see. Unfortunately, the following happens here - you make reforms, and then another presidential administration comes, and professional military personnel are displaced by politically connected people, reforms stop, and then they start again. If there were 25-30 years of long-term reform, the current situation in Ukraine would not have happened.



But there is one way to get a strong army, which is not chosen voluntarily. This is when your existence is at stake. This is what Ukraine is going through now. When you wake up, when you are fighting for your existence, you can reform and fight in different ways, fight more intelligently and understand what you are doing and why.

Unfortunately, there are still many older military officials in Ukraine who were brought up under the Soviet/Russian system. But I feel optimistic that the reform of the Ukrainian army will not stop, because a very large component of the Ukrainian future is the ability to defend itself against Russian aggression. And I think Russia was surprised by the strength with which Ukrainians are ready to defend themselves. I'm not saying this out of politeness. I have cooperated during my career with dozens of countries and I have been very impressed with today's Ukrainian military in terms of its operations in this war.

I spent months talking to American parliamentarians about Ukraine. And I will say that against the backdrop of easing sanctions against Nord Stream 2, Ukraine's best friend in America is Congress. There, Ukraine has unprecedented bipartisan and bicameral support. And I am optimistic about this. It would be a good idea to conclude a bilateral political-military dialogue agreement between Ukraine and the United States and perhaps a multilateral one with other interested countries like Canada, the UK, Lithuania and Poland, since Germany and France would block Ukraine from taking any steps now toward a closer relationship with NATO.

But in any case, I can say that I believe US military assistance to Ukraine will increase. I can't tell you exactly what kind of weapons and equipment will be supplied, but I think it will be the type of assistance Ukraine needs to defend itself against Russia.