

## **MAIN TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF UKRAINE'S NATIONAL INTERESTS**

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### **Introduction**

The second quarter of 2024 was characterized by active domestic political processes in several partner countries of Ukraine, particularly related to election campaigns, which had a significant impact on their foreign policy activities. Moreover, the risks of policy changes after elections due to the possible victory of right-wing and populist parties were assessed as high, which could directly affect the further provision of security assistance to Ukraine. The European Parliament elections in June 2024 became an important signal regarding changes in foreign policy discourse in many countries. Additionally, they demonstrated Russia's capabilities and interest in interfering with European elections.

The global security environment continued its unstable trend. At the same time, virtually all processes were a continuation of previous crises rather than something new. In particular, the North Korean problem developed further due to intensified cooperation with Russia, an increase in China's role was observed, there was a trend towards changing geopolitical orientation of the North Caucasus countries, and tensions in the Middle East continued to escalate.

### **Global Security Environment**

#### **1. Strengthening of Russian-North Korean Cooperation**

In the second quarter of 2024, contacts between the leadership of Russia and North Korea intensified. President Putin's two-day visit to North Korea (June 18-19) became the second trip in history by a Russian head of state to Pyongyang. As a result of the visit, the leaders signed a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which includes a defense agreement and provides for mutual assistance in case of aggression against either of these states.

In fact, the Russian leadership expected two outcomes – agreements on military-technical cooperation and obtaining North Korean weapons, and a political result – demonstrating the absence of Russia's foreign policy isolation.

During the visit, discussions likely went beyond short-term agreements on conventional weapons, as North Korea is interested in this alliance primarily to gain long-term technological advantage over South Korea. The two countries probably discussed joint weapons systems development as well. In particular, in recent years, North Korea has shifted its development from conventional weapons to the missile and aerospace industry. Consequently, after the recent failed launch of a military reconnaissance satellite, North Korea may request Russia's technical assistance in aerospace technologies. As Pyongyang develops its space technologies, Russia's help could be crucial for the successful launch of new satellites.

For Russia, demonstrating existing support from third countries is extremely important. Due to increased statements by NATO member countries about the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine, it was important for Putin to demonstrate not only the existence of political dialogue and provision of weapons but also the readiness of partners to join on the battlefield. It is in this context that we should consider reports about the possible dispatch of North Korean engineering troops brigades to the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

Russia, in turn, is interested in the arsenal of missiles and shells that North Korea has in large quantities due to its highly militarized economy. Most North Korean weapons were developed based on old Soviet systems, and therefore use the same calibers and are compatible with modern Russian ones. The quality of many munitions is low, but the quantity exceeds any current capabilities of European countries to aid Ukraine.

At the same time, South Korean experts emphasize that maintaining military balance with South Korea is extremely important for North Korea, so the transfer of weapons to Russia will not be uncontrollably large, but Russian funding may allow for increased production.

Regarding economic cooperation, Pyongyang most needs "foreign currency inflows" that Russia can provide. But in this case, we're talking about settlements in Chinese yuan, which fully suits North Korea since 90% of its imports come from China. This is a significant difference from attempts to intensify trade relations, for example, with India, where Russia has difficulties with settlements due to sanctions and is forced to keep profits in Indian rupees in Indian banks. There is a possibility that North Korea, in turn, may send its workers to Russia, as examples of such cooperation already exist, but this time, for example, construction workers may be sent to rebuild occupied Ukrainian territories.

Such agreements between the two countries caused significant concern in Seoul and Washington but may also have positive consequences for the Ukrainian "track".

South Korea has restrictions on supplying weapons to countries at war. Therefore, while politically supporting Ukraine and actively working on future reconstruction, until recently, Seoul limited the possibility of military-technical cooperation with Ukraine. The balance of power and, accordingly, available weapons always remain a key factor for South Korea and North Korea. Therefore, Seoul's attention was focused not so much on the question of the quantity of weapons transferred from North Korea to Russia and how this could affect the war in Ukraine. But on what technologies Pyongyang could obtain from Moscow, whether this would lead to technological breakthroughs not only in the nuclear sphere.

Following the visit, official representatives stated that South Korea could consider supplying weapons to Ukraine after the conclusion of a cooperation and defense treaty between Russia and North Korea. And although President Putin warned South Korea against supplying weapons to Ukraine, threatening that Moscow would respond to such a step with a decision that "the current leadership of South Korea would not like", nevertheless, the trend of searching for ways to intensify military-technical cooperation and possible assistance to Ukraine is becoming increasingly progressive.

## **2. SCO Summit**

The SCO summit was an event that clearly outlined trends in the global security environment. The event, which took place in early July in Astana, coincided with the state visit of Chinese leader Xi Jinping to Kazakhstan. The summit included meetings between the Chinese leader and Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, as well as with the presidents of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Azerbaijan's Ilham Aliyev, and Kyrgyzstan's Sadyr Japarov. A meeting between Xi and Putin also took place.

As with Xi Jinping's spring tour of Europe, when he visited France, Serbia, and Hungary, the visit to Kazakhstan was used by the Chinese side to demonstrate China's potential as a separate integration center and an alternative pole of power in the global system. In particular, there was discussion about expanding existing integration associations. Xi Jinping announced that his country supports Kazakhstan's accession to BRICS. Meanwhile, Belarus was admitted to the SCO at the summit.

The meetings and statements during the summit also demonstrated Beijing's interest in developing relations with Azerbaijan. On July 3, the parties signed a declaration on strategic partnership in Astana and expressed interest in mutual projects in green energy and green transition, as well as in the development of the Middle Corridor, which passes through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, crosses the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and connects with Europe via the Black Sea, serving as an alternative to the Eurasian Northern Corridor, whose effectiveness has decreased under sanctions pressure.

Notably, against the background of Russian aggression against Ukraine, relations with China have become prioritized for many states. A number of Central Asian states that are members of the SCO see risks in Russia's expansionist policy and are actively strengthening their ties with China to prevent the Russian threat. In turn, China is using the situation to promote its own narratives and projects (in particular, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Strategic Initiative). China presented the Global Security Initiative back in April 2022 and detailed its vision of a "shared future" for the global security order (the concept paper was published in February 2023). The Global Security Initiative criticizes the current security order as a source of global governance problems and relies on China's position of non-interference and rejection of "power politics" to achieve security. The Global Security Initiative complements the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the recently unveiled Global Civilization Initiative.

To ensure the attractiveness of these initiatives for SCO members, China promised to expand their access to its market and increase trade turnover to \$3 trillion.

Notably, shortly after the summit, on July 6, the Belarusian Ministry of Defense reported that Chinese army servicemen arrived in the country to participate in a joint anti-terrorist training (exercise) scheduled for July 8-19. Formally, the joint training will allow for the exchange of experience, coordination of Belarusian and Chinese units, and create a foundation for further development of Belarusian-Chinese relations in the field of joint troop training. In reality, China is testing the possibility of expanding the geography of the Global Security Initiative beyond the Asian region.

### 3. Potential Changes in the Geopolitical Orientation of South Caucasus Countries

The second quarter of 2024 exacerbated a number of foreign policy issues for the South Caucasus countries. Currently, a potential trend of radical change in the geopolitical orientation of these countries is observed.

Armenia, in 2013, chose not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and clearly focused its foreign policy course on Moscow. The reason for this was the long-standing conflict with Azerbaijan and confidence in protection from Russia. However, during the 2020 war and the subsequent escalation in 2022, Russia effectively refused to defend Armenia. The CSTO also demonstrated its inability (according to some assessments, unwillingness) to protect a member country. Moreover, there was an increase in cooperation between Moscow and Baku, and Russian peacekeepers not only failed to fulfill their tasks but also received a negative reaction from the local population. All this led to the de facto cessation of the NKR's existence on January 1, 2024. In April 2024, the Armenian Prime Minister stated that Armenia would not fight for the NKR.

This had consequences not only for bilateral Armenian-Russian relations but also for Armenia's membership in the Russian military alliance – CSTO. As early as April 2023,

Armenia began to refuse participation in joint exercises under the organization's auspices. In the second quarter of 2024, a serious discussion began regarding Armenia's withdrawal from the CSTO. In particular, at the end of June, Armenia announced its refusal to sign the organization's budget. Also, its representatives increasingly refuse to participate in joint events.

This is happening against the background of announced Armenian-American military exercises (July 15-24), as well as significantly intensified Armenian-Indian military-technical cooperation in recent months, and strengthened economic contacts between Armenia and the EU, as well as political contacts between representatives of Armenia and the United States (at the level of congressmen). Moreover, Yerevan confirmed its participation in the July NATO summit in Washington. Armenia has also intensified dialogue with Ukraine and even participated in the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland. Such actions should not be viewed solely as an element of bargaining with Moscow. Over the past year, there has been significant disappointment in official Yerevan, primarily regarding Russia's capabilities as a security guarantor in the Caucasus and an ally of Armenia. Therefore, in case of successful dialogue with European and American partners, as well as obtaining security guarantees from them, a geopolitical reorientation of Armenia can be expected.

Georgia, in turn, demonstrated an opposite negative trend. Conflicts between the government and the opposition, observed over the past year, intensified due to the preparation of the law on "foreign agents", which largely copies the Russian one. Attacks on the opposition, accusations against the European Union of excessive criticism due to the curtailment of democratic processes, were added to the previous refusal to impose sanctions on Russia, as well as statements about the possible resumption of diplomatic relations with Russia and an increase in direct flights between the two countries.

Mass protests in Georgia over the adoption of the Foreign Agents' Law, which took place in Tbilisi and other cities in May, exacerbated the conflict between Tbilisi and Brussels, as well as Washington. The harsh position of the Georgian government and political manipulations effectively led to the suspension of Georgia's EU accession process.

Against this background, it is important to note statements by the Georgian leadership that essentially repeat Russian narratives. Government representatives repeatedly stated that the Revolution of Dignity was the cause of the Russian-Ukrainian war, so Georgians should abandon anti-government protests if they don't want war in Georgia. In fact, representatives of the ruling party repeatedly blamed Ukrainians and Europeans, removing responsibility from Moscow.

A negative signal was the American side's refusal to hold the annual American-Georgian military exercises "due to false accusations by the Georgian side against the USA". Many experts explain this as unwillingness to give the Georgian government an opportunity (as was



done with granting EU candidate status) to manipulate the event to demonstrate Western leaders' support for the official Tbilisi course. At the same time, American military officials reacted negatively to this step, believing that in this way, the USA could lose military contacts with Georgia and presence in the region as a counterbalance to Russia.

Azerbaijan, for its part, is increasingly moving away from the European course. Thus, during the SCO summit, it was announced that Baku is considering joining BRICS. Additionally, a Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership between Azerbaijan and China was signed. Moreover, contacts between Baku and Moscow have intensified over the past year. In April 2024, the complete withdrawal of the Russian contingent from Nagorno-Karabakh, which Baku had been seeking, was announced.

#### 4. The Unresolved Gaza Issue

The 2nd quarter of 2024, against the backdrop of unsuccessful diplomatic negotiations regarding the exchange of hostages and ceasefire in Gaza, was also characterized by increased confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah and the constant risk of the beginning of a Lebanese-Israeli armed conflict (more extensive than periodic border shelling). In June alone, Hezbollah carried out nearly 300 attacks in Northern Israel.

At the same time, according to sources, the official Lebanese government was sending signals to Israel that they do not desire war. However, Hezbollah coordinates its actions with Iran, and after the success of the Houthi naval operations, as well as studying the experience of the Russian naval blockade of Ukrainian ports, information about a possible naval blockade of Israel is appearing more frequently. A possible escalation between Israel and Hezbollah is expected in the second half of July, which Middle Eastern experts associate with the Israeli Knesset's recess and, consequently, the full control over decision-making that the Israeli Prime Minister will obtain.

During the 2nd quarter, France, Egypt, Qatar, and partially the USA were actively involved in the peace process. However, none of the mediators was successful.

The April shelling of Israeli territory by Iran became the first such example of direct confrontation, rather than indirect through proxies. At the same time, it had a limited effect and result, which most likely indicated a desire to demonstrate obligatory retaliation for actions against Iran, rather than a desire for full-scale war. Nevertheless, Iran's actions were negatively perceived in Jordan, whose territory was also under threat, and in Egypt, as it saw the possibility of another escalation in the region. The direct involvement of US and UK military forces and the repelling of the attack was meant to demonstrate the steadfastness of security guarantees. This step was important not only in relation to Israel. After insufficient aid to Ukraine, some Middle Eastern countries with US security guarantees, such as Qatar, were extremely concerned about the possible unwillingness of the US to protect its allies, so they closely observed any actions regarding other strategic partners.

## Impact of the Internal Political Factor on the Security Environment

### 1. Elections to the European Parliament

The elections to the European Parliament, which concluded on June 9, 2024, became a key indicator of emerging trends in the political preferences of European Union citizens. Despite the gradual increase in European voters' preference for right-wing, and in some cases far-right parties, the election results showed that mainstream moderate political forces will retain the majority in the European Parliament. The European People's Party (represented by the current President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen) retained its right to be considered the largest political group in the European Parliament. The number of mandates it won (188 mandates, 26.1%) even increased by 12 compared to 2019. This result significantly strengthened Ursula von der Leyen's chances of leading the European Commission in the next term. The respective political decision has already been made and is only awaiting approval by the new composition of the European Parliament. The Social Democrats' performance also proved to be quite high. Despite the fact that in some EU countries the popularity of social democrats is declining (for instance, in Germany, the ruling Social Democratic Party is only third in terms of support after the Christian Democratic Party and Alternative for Germany), this trend has not yet been reflected at the pan-European level. Compared to 2019, the party lost only 3 mandates and, accordingly, received the second-best result (136 mandates, 18.9%). This allows the party to participate in the distribution of portfolios in European institutions and claim the position of President of the Council.

However, it's not possible to speak about the stability of the European Parliament's composition and the unchanging favorites compared to 2019. The performance of the Renew group, which is oriented towards French President Macron, significantly deteriorated. It lost 26 mandates and as a result took the 4th position (76 mandates, 10.6% support). This indicator showed that the group's orientation towards a specific politician leads to volatility and depends on Emmanuel Macron's success at the national level. Nevertheless, despite the significant deterioration in performance, the group will still get representation in European institutions – Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, who belongs to the group, is highly likely to be approved as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs.

Instead of Renew, representatives of the European Conservatives and Reformists group, which is largely oriented towards Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Polish ex-Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, took the third position. Compared to 2019, the group gained an additional 15 mandates (a total of 84 mandates, 11.7%). The indicators of the Identity and Democracy group (oriented towards Marine Le Pen) also increased, gaining an additional 8 seats (a total of 57 seats, 7.9%).

However, the arithmetic increase in the number of right-wing representatives in the European Parliament did not lead to a significant strengthening of their positions due to internal discord

in their ranks, as well as due to the announcement by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban about the creation of an additional group of European right-wingers – Patriots of Europe. Representatives from 7 EU countries have already joined the group, which is a necessary condition for formalizing such a group, and it is highly likely that some members from the Conservatives and Reformists group and some from the Identity and Democracy group will flow into it, which, accordingly, may weaken the pan-European positions of G. Meloni and M. Le Pen and strengthen V. Orban's indicators.

The losses of European Greens are notable. It can be assumed that this was the result of aggressive attacks against the European Green Deal and corresponding reforms, including in the sensitive area of agriculture – it was the European right that exploited these theses during their election campaigns.

This indicates that despite the highest chances of re-approving Ursula von der Leyen as the head of the European Commission, she will likely have to adjust her priorities, consider the possibility of situational alliances with right-wing groups (although social democrats are strongly opposed to this at the moment), and pay more attention to the needs of farmers, which may slow down the pace of the European green transition, as well as complicate negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU. However, on the other hand, security and economic support for Ukraine, strengthening the EU's geopolitical role, and attention to security policy will remain high on the agenda.

## 2. Elections in Iran

On June 28 and July 5, early presidential elections were held in Iran following the death of the previous president, Ebrahim Raisi, in an air crash on May 19, 2024. For the first time since 2005, the elections in Iran took place in two rounds. As a result of the second round of elections (July 5), moderate reformist politician Masoud Pezeshkian won with 53.6% of the votes. Despite significant protest movements in Iran over the past two years, voter turnout was record low – only 34% of Iranians came to the polls in the first round. This can be explained by two factors – the disqualification of some conditionally opposition candidates, and Iran's political system, through which major decisions are actually made not by the country's president, but by the supreme leader. Thus, for example, the candidacy of former president Ahmadinejad, who is in opposition, was rejected.

During the election campaign, the winner Pezeshkian advocated for greater openness to negotiations with the West, relaxation of conservative requirements for women that had triggered previous women's protests, and paid significant attention to Iran's internal social and economic issues. In addition, he advocated for the restoration of the nuclear deal but insisted that the US must fulfill its part.

This is happening against the backdrop of negotiations on signing a comprehensive cooperation agreement between Russia and Iran. Its signing was expected earlier, but in early



June, Russian representatives stated that the negotiations were stalling due to difficulties on the Iranian side.

The question of a possible escalation of the Iran-Israel confrontation still remains. After the April strikes that Iran carried out directly against Israel, rather than through its proxies in various countries as was the case before, this issue has become even more relevant.

At the same time, despite the new president's more moderate position, no serious change in Iran's foreign policy stance should be expected. Firstly, this concerns relations with Russia, as the new head of state's more liberal approach will not translate into a less anti-American position, but a refusal to support Hezbollah. Secondly, Iran's foreign policy is largely determined not by the president, but by the supreme leader, so it will remain unchanged on most fundamental issues. However, there is a possibility that the new leader could become a chance for renewed dialogue with the West.

The actual change of the head of state does not yet open opportunities for Ukraine to influence Russian-Iranian strategic relations. Iran is unlikely to abandon its current cooperation with Moscow. In the event of successful negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program and the restoration of trust between Tehran and Western partners, there is a small chance of breaking the military-technical cooperation between the two states, but at least in the medium term and subject to the start of reforms within Iran.

### 3. Elections and Electoral Situation in Neighboring EU Member States

The European Parliament elections have revealed trends in individual EU member states neighboring Ukraine. For instance, in **Poland**, there remains significant societal polarization. Representatives of Prime Minister Donald Tusk's Civic Platform (belonging to the European People's Party) and the opposition Law and Justice party (belonging to the European Conservatives and Reformists) achieved similar results in the European elections. Next year, Poland will hold the EU presidency. Presidential elections will also take place there. Current trends indicate that the intensity of political struggle in the country will increase, which in turn suggests that the Ukrainian issue may become a subject of speculation for Polish politicians, as has already happened during the parliamentary campaign.

Polarization is also deepening in neighboring **Slovakia**, especially after the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico, known for his loyalty to Moscow and restraint in matters of supporting Ukraine (current government representatives have even initiated criminal investigations against their predecessors for the support provided to Ukraine). Despite the ongoing investigation, the Slovak Prime Minister's team has already accused the opposition of provoking the assassination attempt through their speeches against government policies.

The situation in **Romania** also deserves attention. Although the coalition of the National Liberal Party (belonging to the European People's Party) and the Social Democratic Party won the European Parliament elections, the AUR party, known for its outbursts against Ukraine, took second place, albeit with a gap of almost 40%. Since this is an election year for Romania (both parliamentary and presidential elections will be held), the current trend should be perceived as worrying. AUR will evidently enter the Romanian parliament and may continue, in cooperation with radicals from the SOS party, to create problems for bilateral Ukrainian-Romanian relations and speculate on the sensitive topic of support for Ukraine, in particular, intensively spreading narratives about the need to reduce aid to Kyiv (such attempts have already been made against the backdrop of Bucharest's decision to transfer the Patriot system to Ukraine).

In **Bulgaria**, which also plays a significant role in providing support to Ukraine (primarily ammunition), early parliamentary elections were held simultaneously with the EU elections. However, the current composition of the parliament, where forces positively disposed towards Ukraine (GERB-SDS, DPS, and PP-DB) cannot find common ground, while pro-Russian parties like Revival and BSP do not have a majority, is likely to lead to another political crisis and repeat early elections. And despite the fact that technical transitional governments continue to provide support to Ukraine, there is an increasing risk that pro-Russian factions will strengthen in the new parliament.

The general trend towards increased polarization, speculation on issues of support for Ukraine, and the strengthening of openly or covertly pro-Russian factions in the region indicates that Russia is making efforts in the region to destabilize, which could become a challenge both for supporting Ukraine and for stability in the EU.

### Geopolitical Dimension of Economic and Energy Cooperation

#### Egypt – EU

On June 30, the "Egypt – EU" economic forum opened in Cairo. As a result, the EU allocated 1 billion euros to Egypt as part of support for economic reforms, and forum participants signed over 20 memorandums for a total amount exceeding 40 billion euros.

Against the backdrop of a significant economic crisis in Egypt, with a possible default within a year, attention and financial assistance from the EU is an extremely important signal. Egypt's stability is important both in itself and in the context of the Arab-Israeli confrontation, as well as the situation in Sudan, etc. EU assistance is important not only from an economic but also from a political point of view. In recent months, cooperation between Russia and Egypt has significantly intensified, not only in the traditional military-technical sphere but also regarding food security. Egypt's significant debt for Russian grain and willingness to buy stolen Ukrainian grain are negative signals and an opportunity for Moscow to hook Cairo, thus guaranteeing the loyalty of this influential regional state.

However, as Egypt tries not to orient itself solely on one side and expands cooperation with countries such as the UAE and Azerbaijan (in particular, a Cooperation Agreement was signed in June, which provides for cooperation in economic, information spheres and renewable energy issues), we can speak of a currently neutral trend regarding Egypt's foreign policy orientation. The enhanced cooperation with Moscow can be characterized as a risk factor, but so far not one that leads to Cairo's political reorientation towards Russia, as the importance of diversifying military cooperation remains among the priorities.

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