

Concept for the 12th Annual Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club

October 19–22, 2015

Theme:

**Societies between War and Peace:
Overcoming the Logic of Conflict in Tomorrow's World**

Is the world on the brink of a new war? Or has it already begun?

Armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine; economic pressure aimed at forcing opponents to comply; “color revolutions” and the projection of “soft power” with devastating consequences. How else can one describe the increasing use of various types of force and threat of force in international disputes other than a war? Nowadays, we hear about cyber war, trade conflicts, sanctions, dairy and even banana wars. This is pure evidence that military language has deeply infiltrated into all spheres of international dialogue. War has become an integral element of public conscience. It is now a commonplace to talk about an all-out and possibly a nuclear war. Some believe the Islamic State (ISIS) is capable of using nuclear weapons, others are wary of North Korea, while others fear that Europe may be overtaken by unpredictable developments. Each party is constantly reminding the other of its ability to turn the other opponent into “radioactive dust”.

This growing strife is a result of global changes. The old world order collapsed back in the 1990s. A unipolar system remains a dangerous illusion. It is still unclear what a new world order would look like.

However, this is not a unique situation. Two hundred years ago, after a series of destructive wars and social upheavals in Europe, the great powers agreed to create the “*Concert of Europe*”, a new system of relations. This led to the golden age of diplomacy and a balance of power. There was relatively stable peace for several decades. It was not disrupted by conflicts between super powers or major social shifts or turmoil.

For Russia, that period was an era of geopolitical triumph and the starting point of a new cultural and intellectual rise. The events of the early 19th century, their impact on Russian and European societies, and their meaning for history were aptly described in Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Russian most outstanding novel.

Initially, Tolstoy named his novel *War and Truce*, then changed it to *War and the World*, and eventually settled for “*Война и мир*”, which was translated into English as *War and Peace*, although Russian word “*мир*” actually means “society”, “world”. Tolstoy offered an insight to the essence of human existence. He asked the question: Is human history a war interrupted by truces or peace broken up by conflicts?

Today’s changes in the world order are no less revolutionary than those of two hundred years ago, after the end of Napoleonic wars and the establishment of a seemingly stable world order.

Session 1. Does the world need wars? What is the role of war and military might in public conscience in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries?

Wars and the use of power, primarily military force, have always been a universal method of establishing global hierarchy. They accompanied and sometimes triggered sociopolitical development.

After the end of the Cold War, many people thought that military force is no more a decisive factor in international relations. However, life has refuted this view. The scope of force has changed, and the interpretation of *casus belli* as an act or event that provokes or is used to justify war, and the types of war have broadened. Humanitarian interventions, which were first recorded in the 1990s, have been extensively used to justify military intervention without a *casus belli*. The criteria for assessing the legitimacy of military operations have totally disappeared. This duality has made hypocrisy a systemic factor. People in industrialized countries see war as a virtual reality, a media product, rather than a real battlefield where people are killed and wounded. Nevertheless, the illusion that goals can be achieved with precision weapons in a remote contactless war has faded away, because when sanctions and information warfare fail to achieve their purpose, modern conflicts invariably slide into direct military confrontation, just as it happened in the past. In reality, existence of numerous ways of applying power – always reinforced with military force – in various spheres of international relations, from the economy to culture, have led to dramatic changes in the world order.

This session will discuss the extent and ways of possible use of military force in the coming decades. It will also consider those wars societies are likely to approve, which kind of wars societies and governments will be ready to fight for, and whether an all-out war is possible.

Session 2. Is war peace? Why are the now dominant media dividing societies?

In his dystopian novel *1984*, George Orwell described a totalitarian society that denies facts and objectivity and whose only goal is to control people's minds. Although *1984* has long past, the war to control people's minds rages on and has even intensified due to media diversity that was unimaginable during Orwell's time.

The total and all-permeating communication environment is aggravating clashes between different worldviews and is creating a situation that precludes rational exchange of opinions and replaces it with mindless exchange of junk information. Modern technology can generate an illusion of confidence. Information is used to create diametrically opposite views of the world. Conflicting parties use the media as a communication weapon in their hot and cold conflicts, outlining a distorted picture of reality in the minds of tens, if not hundreds of millions of people. This clashing of pictures leads to hostility and polarization. Ideologies, which were once based on ideas, are now being increasingly molded by perceptions and emotions.

Moreover, information diversity has created a situation where the multitude of communication tools has divided humanity instead of uniting it. The amount of common knowledge is shrinking in different countries, where people are now increasingly fed with a number of delusions and myths, many of which were deliberately planted in their minds. As a result, the war to control the human mind is becoming a constant background of our lives.

Session 3. The economy in the global and interdependent world: An instrument of war or a means of preserving peace?

It was believed at the end of the 20th century that economic interdependence could ease tensions and reduce conflicts between states. The 21st century has shown that interdependence is not an extenuating but frequently an aggravating factor when political differences arise. Each side attempts to deal the most painful blow to its opponent. Economic sanctions, first used by the United States, have become the most widely exploited lever.

Is it possible to limit the scope of geo-economic and geo-financial wars? This is especially important at the new stage of technological development, which will widen the divide between countries and hence strengthen the resolve of underdeveloped countries to use military force to compensate for their weakness. If economic superiority is often used as a lever, can the growing economic and technological divide be bridged? Can business learn to resist pressure from politicians, or is it doomed to remain subordinate and to adjust to conditions created by the political leadership?

Session 4. Diplomacy in the 21st century: Can it prevent wars? Is another golden age of diplomacy possible?

When the Cold War ended, diplomacy seemed to lose its purpose. It was believed that global processes could only be moving in the direction outlined by the Western victory in the Cold War, with issues addressed under Western conditions. Diplomacy was only expected to rubberstamp the preset results.

But things started changing in the 21st century. The number of conflicts started growing, involving great powers with clashing interests. No country can have the monopoly on “correct” interpretation of problems. There are no ready-made formulas for settling conflicts, and analogies do not apply here. Diplomacy has resumed its task of finding and applying solutions to each particular problem.

At the same time, information transparency is undermining the foundations of diplomacy, and the style accepted in the media is penetrating international relations. Social media habits have spread to the highest international level, aggravating dangerous differences. The goal of this session is to understand the role and limitations of diplomacy in the 21st century.

Session 5. Correcting past mistakes: Which post-Cold War decisions have strengthened the peace and which have weakened it?

The post-Cold War era was a time of great expectations and great disappointments, frustrated hopes and unexpected turns of events. What looked like “the end of history” turned out to be a transition from one development stage to another, a relatively stable but so far vague period. We still need to analyze this transformation experience and draw conclusions for the future. During this session, politicians will talk about the difficulties of choices they have had to make in their work.

The participants are also invited to discuss NATO expansion, the bombing of Belgrade, the wars and armed conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet republics, the Arab Spring, Crimea’s integration into Russia, ISIS and al-Qaeda, developments that have already become facts in history and ongoing processes.

Panel meeting on the theme “Together against Threats: Overcoming Strife for the Sake of General Progress”

Special events

- Special session: Education and science – an area for cooperation?
- Special evening session: “Russian literature as the mirror of the Russian mindset: predictions, warnings, and the basis for national identity”
- Special session: “New rules or a game without rules: One year on”
- Meetings with Russian leaders