

## The “New” Eastern Question

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## ABSTRACT

*In the post-Cold War era, the competition between West and East - naval and land powers - for influence in Eurasia in the form of the “New” Eastern Question is more dangerous than ever. The culmination of the classical Eastern Question in the 19th century led to the extinction of the great European empires. Today we are experiencing the peak of the New Eastern Question. This article examines the main parameters of the Eastern Question in the 19th century and, through comparison with the modern era, concludes that the culmination of the “New” Eastern Question will lead to the establishment of a new world order.*

**Keywords:** Eastern Question, Eurasia, Middle East, Eastern Europe, British Empire, Russia, United States

*“So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death.”*

Thomas Hobbes, 1651

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## Introduction

The debate on the Eastern Question has dominated the literature for a long time in the past. The period of intense debate coincides with a time of significant developments. The Eastern Question occupies an important place in the literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries. From the middle of the 20th century - after the beginning of the Cold War - it lost its relevance and its literary interest is limited. As a term, the Eastern Question does not simply refer to a specific problem. It refers to individual issues, conflicting interests, rivalries, crises, conflicts and wars on a small and large scale, which have been developing in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Middle East mainly from the 18th century to perhaps the modern era. The roots of the Eastern Question - in the sense of the timeless geopolitical, geo-economic and cultural conflict between East and West - go back to antiquity, tracing their origins to the Greco-Persian Wars. J.A.R. Marriott places it at the dawn of history with the conflict between Ancient Greeks and Persians [1]. Arthur R. Gray postulates that the Eastern Question was raised in the 11th century, with the attacks of the Seljuk Turks against the Greek Christian inhabitants of Asia Minor [2]. However, the issue intensified with Islam's continued attempts to dominate the Western Christian states from the 15th century onwards [3]. Édouard Driault defines the Eastern Question as the history of the progress of neighboring peoples at the expense of Muslim ones [4].

In its classical form, the Eastern Question concerns the rivalries between the great powers over the fate of the territories of the gradually collapsing Ottoman Empire [5]. Gustav Diezel posits that the essence of the Eastern Question concerns the shattering of Ottoman sovereignty and the competition between the European powers for the division of the Ottoman Empire [6]. William Miller defines the Eastern Question as the problem of

filling the gap created by the gradual disappearance of the Ottoman Empire from Europe. He places the beginning of the question in 1699 with the Treaty of Karlowitz, which he describes as the first partition of the Ottoman Empire [7]. According to other views, the starting point of the issue is the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) [8]. As maintained by James McKellar Bugbee, the Eastern Question first gained prominence in Europe during the reign of Catherine II of Russia. After the overwhelming defeat of the Ottomans by the Russians in the Second Russo-Turkish War (1787-1792), the British intervened in the Eastern Question for the first time. They adopted the policy of preserving the Ottoman Empire and preventing the capture of Constantinople, with the aim of forestalling the further growth of Russian power [9]. The majority of historians stress that the Eastern Question ended at the beginning of the 20th century with the conclusion of World War I, the dissolution of the great European empires and the emergence of a new world order [10]. Other scholars believe that the Cold War, or even the accession of the Republic of Turkey to the North Atlantic Treaty, put an end to the question [11].

This article aims to demonstrate that the Eastern Question is not over. On the contrary, since the end of the 20th century - in the post-Cold War era - we have been experiencing the “New” Eastern Question, one of its most important and dangerous manifestations. The designation “New” is given to emphasize that, despite the preservation of certain constants that define it, other parameters have changed, making the Eastern Question even more dangerous for world security and peace. Geopolitical developments in the Eastern European region and geostrategic and geo-economic rivalries at the global level suggest that the Eastern Question continues to evolve in perhaps a different form, but always in the same general context, which is competition for influence in Eurasia and control of maritime and land trade routes. In modern times, the Eurasian continent is

once again at the center of rivalries. According to the Eurasia Group's estimates for 2024, wars in the Middle East and Ukraine rank second and third respectively among the greatest global risks [12]. For 2025, the same organization estimates that the risk of a global crisis, even a global war, is higher than at any other time [13]. First, the main parameters of the Eastern Question in the 19th century will be examined. Then the constants and variables of the "New" Eastern Question will be analysed. The comparative assessment will demonstrate important similarities and common features. Despite the geopolitical, economic and technological developments of the last two centuries, the key issues and the areas of antagonisms, crises and conflicts remain unchanged. However, certain aspects are discernible, thus making it much more dangerous than in the past. The deterioration poses the risk of global nuclear disaster. De-escalation will probably lead to a reconfiguration of the international system.

### **The Eastern Question in the 19th Century - Main Parameters**

J. Holland Rose stresses that the Eastern Question focuses on the religious, social, and political antagonisms it created [14]. According to Édouard Driault, the Eastern Question concerns the struggle between the Cross and the Crescent, while J. A. R. Marriott sees it as the clash of ideas, perceptions, and customs between West and East in the territories of South-Eastern Europe [15]. Alexander Schem, in 1878, listed the physical and moral condition of the Christian nationalities of the Ottoman Empire, Pan-Slavism, the multitude and diversity of the subordinate nationalities within the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and the conflicting interests of the British and Russian Empires as the main unresolved sub-problems of the Eastern Question [16]. Nicholas Rizopoulos points out, among other things, that in addition to the geopolitical rivalries of the Great Powers, the main factors of the Eastern Question were ethnic claims combined with primordial racial and religious hatreds [17]. In view of the above, the main aspects or parameters of the Eastern Question in the 19th century will be explored. The parameters that will be briefly examined are spatial, political-military, socio-economic, cultural-religious, and finally technological.

#### **Spatial**

The geographical area of the development of the Eastern Question mainly concerns the territory of the Ottoman Empire. At the beginning of the 19th century, the already decadent and vast empire covered an area of some three million square kilometers, from the Danube and the northern coast of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula and present-day Iraq. If the main actors and the nature of their antagonisms are taken into account, it is clear that the Eurasian continent is essentially the area where the issue developed. The rivalries of the great powers were not only focused on the control and exploitation of the provinces of the collapsing empire but mainly on securing the land and sea trade routes of the Eurasian continent.

The Danube and the great rivers of Eurasia, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, the Aegean Sea, Palestine and the Holy Land, the Euphrates, and the Suez Canal provided access to either the wealth-producing resources of the East, the Indies, the Far East, and Africa for the transport of wealth and valuable raw materials to the states of Europe. In addition, the Balkan

Peninsula was an area of antagonism because of its strategic position for control of the Straits and the Eastern Mediterranean, despite Bismarck's admission to the contrary in 1877 [18].

#### **Political-military**

The powers involved in the Eastern Question have not always been the same. Around the end of the 17th century, neighboring Austria and Russia sought to benefit from the weakening of the Ottomans, as did Napoleonic France. For Russia, the Ottoman Empire was an obstacle, a blocking wall, in its attempt to descend to the "warm seas" and open up land routes to the Levant. Great Britain, seeking to set limits to Russian ambitions that posed a threat to its unimpeded access to the Indies, alarmed by Bonaparte's occupation of Egypt in 1798 and his pursuit of a naval base at Suez, was forced to intervene in the Eastern Mediterranean and become involved in the Eastern Question [19]. Germany and Italy followed and, after their unification, they became involved at the end of the 19th century. The United States, remote and isolated from European affairs because of the ocean that separates them, was not directly involved in the geopolitical antagonisms of the Eastern Question. However, the main actors, with the Ottoman Empire being the apple of their eye, were the British and Russian Empires, in roles of rivals and competitors for geopolitical and economic influence.

The stance of the great European powers towards the Ottoman Empire was not stable. Depending on national interests, sometimes they were in favor of maintaining the status quo and at other times they sought to change it. The involvement of the British Empire from the end of the 18th century marked the transformation of the Eastern Question from a regional to a pan-European - and by extension global - issue, with the main stake being to avoid disturbing the balance of power in the East. For most of the 19th century, Great Britain sought to preserve the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. The geopolitical value of the Ottoman Empire was intertwined with the national interests and economic survival of the British Empire and, secondarily, France. The absolute control of sea and land trade access to the East, to maintain and enlarge the British monopoly with the resource-rich regions was the main objective. As Charles B. Boynton argues, England's commercial and industrial interests, combined with its naval power and world supremacy, were the beacon of the cold calculations of its foreign policy [20].

The Russian Empire was the main threat to British interests. The possibility of Russian descent into the "warm seas" and land access to India was the British nightmare. Demonstrative of British perceptions, fear, and hostility towards the Russian Empire were the views expressed in 1835 by the main representative of Russophobia in the 19th century, David Urquhart. A few years after the Treaty of Adrianople (1829) and Hünkâr İskelesi (1833), Urquhart believed that - despite the assurances to the contrary by Tsar Nicholas I - the Russians were seeking to occupy and control Constantinople. He stresses that this development would be disastrous for the political and economic interests of the British Empire. He notes that the Russian occupation of the Dardanelles would nullify the importance of the British possessions in the East. On the geopolitical value of Constantinople he states:

*"The possessor of the capital possesses the empire; the possessor of the Dardanelles possesses the East. [21]"*

Around the same time, an opposing view was expressed by Richard Cobden. An advocate of peace and free trade, Cobden attempted to deconstruct Urquhart's arguments and convince English public opinion that the wisest policy was for Britain to refrain from getting involved in Russo-Turkish relations. He believed that the occupation of Ottoman territories was of no interest to Russia because it would weaken it by adding more territory to its already vast empire [22]. A few years later, during the Crimean War, the Polish-born Count Adam de Gurowski argued that Russia had no desire, nor the ability, to attack and conquer Europe. He considered it absurd to advocate the contrary since it had been historically proven that any attempts at universal domination of Europe by Charlemagne or Napoleon had been thwarted or had failed [23]. In 1877, Bugbee referred to a meeting between the Tsar and a British diplomat in St. Petersburg in January 1853. At the meeting, the Tsar stated that he did not share Catherine the Great's vision and that his empire was so vast and his power so great that it would be absurd for him to desire more territory or power. On the contrary, in the Czar's view, the great and only danger to so great an empire was that which would result from its expansion [24]. Alexander Schem argued in 1878 that certain facts which had recently become known, attested that the Russian government, as of 1829, had been convinced that maintaining Ottoman rule on the Bosphorus was the preferable situation for the commercial and political interests of the Russian Empire. According to Schem, the above conclusion can also be inferred from a dialogue between Tsar Nicholas I and the Ambassador of Austria-Hungary on 8 February 1833. The Tsar, referring to the internal problems of the Ottomans, expressed his willingness to help the Porte in dealing with them and added:

*"...but that is all I can do. I cannot give life to a dead body, and the Turkish Empire is dead; but if it falls, I do not want any of its remains, I do not need them [25]."*

From the early 1850s, Great Britain perceived the existence of a triple threat to its geostrategic and economic interests. In addition to the Russian Empire, the continued rise of the United States made them a threat to British and French interests. Also, Louis Napoleon's attempt, after he accedes to the throne in 1852, to make France a great military and naval power again, made it a potential threat. To avert the triple jeopardy, Great Britain allied with France in May 1853 [26]. The fruit of the alliance was the defeat of Russia in the Crimean War, as well as the attempt to directly or indirectly challenge the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed in 1823. The American Civil War was a prime opportunity for Great Britain to weaken its former colony. It sought to divide the United States into two states. For France, the American Civil War provided an opportunity to expand and consolidate its acquisitions and influence in the Americas [27]. At the end of the 19th century, the increased Russian influence in the Balkans under Pan-Slavism and the bloody suppression by the Ottoman Empire of the rebellions of the Christian populations caused concern in Great Britain. Some argued for a more forceful and interventionist British policy towards the Ottomans. William Denton argued for a change of stance for moral and geopolitical reasons and to pressure the Sultan to implement the provisions and guarantees of Hatt-i Humayun. He believed that protecting the oppressed Christian populations would strengthen Britain's position by reducing Russian influence in the region [28]. Others, such as W. J. Wyatt believed that maintaining the status quo was in the interest of the British Empire [29].

After the uprisings in the Balkans and the signing of the Treaties of San Stefano and Berlin in 1877, British policy changed. As of 1878, Great Britain started considering that the preservation of the Ottoman Empire was not necessary to achieve its foreign policy objectives. The assumption of the occupation and administration of Cyprus and the shift of interest from the Bosphorus Straits to the new Suez Canal played a decisive role in the new British geopolitical positioning [30]. The shift in British policy coincides with the intensification of German involvement in the Eastern Question from 1898. The German-Turkish rapprochement and increasing German influence in the East forced Britain, France and Russia to set aside their differences and join forces. In April 1904, Britain and France joined the Entente Cordiale and in August 1907 the Anglo-Russian Entente was formed [31]. The outbreak of World War I constituted a major crisis of the Eastern Question, which in some ways differentiated it, due to the changes in the powers involved and in the international system after the end of the Great War, while in others it resolved it with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire [32].

### **Socioeconomic**

Gabriel Monod in the Preface to Driault's book argues that the main reason for the weakening of the Ottoman Empire was that it did not assimilate the peoples it conquered [33]. The Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual state entity with subjects of different racial, ethnological, cultural and religious backgrounds. The majority of the subjects experienced oppression and in the 19th century claimed satisfaction of their national yearnings for independence. At the same time, socioeconomic changes in the West in the 18th and 19th centuries, with the consolidation of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, contributed to the erosion of Ottoman power.

Marx and Engels, in their writings from the late 1840s, express certainty about the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, as a result of the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe. They also anticipated a new revolutionary wave that would automatically solve the Eastern Question, because Russian expansionism would disappear and the efforts of the other Western powers to stop it would cease [34]. According to John Holms, the poor economic situation of the Ottoman Empire, widespread corruption, the decline in the incomes of its subjects, and heavy taxation, especially in the 1875-1876 period, contributed to the uprisings in the Christian regions of the Balkans. He concluded that the Turks were an unproductive people, the country lacked the infrastructure to facilitate trade and that bankruptcy was inevitable [35].

The survival and growth of the British Empire in the 19th century was intertwined with the development of its economy, based mainly on manufacturing and its monopoly of trade with its colonies. A typical example of British efforts to acquire commercial monopolies is the fact that, as early as the beginning of the 17th century, an English consul had been established in Moscow and a monopoly of trade with Russia had been achieved [36]. The preservation of the British Empire's position as the "Mistress of the Sea" and the further expansion of its trade and monopolies through the sea routes to the countries of the Levant and India, which was a vital element in its survival, were based on three factors. First, to maintain and increase military and especially naval power while at the same time hindering the efforts of other states to become great naval powers. Second, to exert full influence and control over countries or regions that control points of geostrategic importance, such as the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, the Suez Canal, and Gibraltar. Finally, the stranglehold on resource-rich areas



to feed British production, mainly by adding them to the grid of British colonies and deterring other states' attempts to expand. According to Boynton, the key objectives of British foreign policy from the mid-17th century onwards were to make Britain the first - and if possible the only - country in manufacturing and production. To monopolize the conduct of world trade with its own ships and to accumulate the gold and silver of all nations, so that the British would become the bankers and managers of capital worldwide. All along the way towards this direction, Great Britain was ruthless and unconcerned about the rights and interests of its colonies and drained their wealth [37]. For Cobden, the existence of a powerful navy under the excuse of protecting British trade was a popular justification for maintaining and increasing military armaments and waging wars. In reality, the progress of British trade did not depend on the existence of a strong fleet, but on low prices and superior quality compared to competing products of other nations [38]. From the beginning of the 16th century, when it began to recover from the occupation of the Golden Horde, Russia realized that the only way to become a great power was to gain a share of trade with the East [39]. It was the permanent competitor of Great Britain and occasionally of France. The Russian Empire's access to the East, and particularly to India and China, was the route known since ancient times through the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Ural Mountains, interspersed with the Tatar and Ottoman barriers. In order to secure the lucrative trade with the East, the Russian Empire was trying to occupy Ottoman territories, just as Great Britain was enslaving India for the same reason. From this point of view, the gradual Russian expansion towards Crimea, south towards the Danube and around the Black Sea, as well as its stranglehold on Constantinople for most of the time, was the result of the same ambitions as the other European Powers. According to Boynton, the above demonstrates the hypocrisy of those who accuse Russia of being the only expansionist and barbaric power that disturbs the European balance [40]. However, despite continuous efforts to gain unimpeded maritime access to the Mediterranean and resource-rich areas, the Russian fleet continued to suffocate within the Black Sea and in the Baltic. As Mahan wrote in 1900:

*"...it is abundantly clear that Russia can never be satisfied with the imperfect, and politically dependent, access to the sea afforded her by the Baltic and the Black Sea..."* [41]

The United States in the mid-19th century posed a potential threat to the economic interests of the British Empire. The former British colony on the other side of the Atlantic had become a major competitor in world markets. It had considerable industrial plants and its merchant fleet was on a par with Britain's. The British leadership realized that nothing would prevent the United States from eclipsing its former metropolis and therefore this course had to be halted [42]. The American Civil War was seen by Great Britain - and secondarily by France for its reasons - as an opportunity to halt the progress of the United States. As Boynton points out, the future supremacy of Britain and France depended on the size of their trade and industrial production combined with the military and naval forces required to secure their interests and sources of wealth and power. If the influence of the great religious organisations is added to the economic interests, then the core of the foreign policy of the great European powers is the result [43].

### **Cultural - Religious**

An important pillar closely linked to the geopolitical and economic footprint of the main actors in the Eastern Question was the cultural and religious background. The cultural and especially religious aspect played an important role in the foreign policy choices of Russia, Great Britain and France. Bugbee notes that the Russian desire to occupy Constantinople is as old as their national identity. It is based on the idea that the Tsars, as successors to the Byzantine emperors, should rule the holy city on the Bosphorus instead of the infidel Turks who had enslaved their brother Slavic peoples and the Orthodox Church [44]. In 1868, the Russian Nikolay Danilevsky argued that the historical destiny of Russia, the other Slavic peoples, and the Greeks had assigned to them the role of the custodian of the religious truth of Orthodoxy, making them the successors of Israel and Byzantium as God's chosen peoples [45]. The protection of the subordinate Orthodox Christians of the European Ottoman territories had been the pretext for Russian interventionism, to serve the perennial geopolitical need for an exit to the "warm seas". The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca was an important diplomatic step. This was followed in the mid-19th century by the competition between Russia and France for influence in the Porte, under the guise of religious competition between Orthodox and Catholics for primacy in the Holy Land. The result was the Russo-Turkish War in 1853 and then the Crimean War in 1854 [46]. In the last quarter of the 19th century, Russia took advantage of the new crisis of the Eastern Question with the Balkan revolts, assuming the role of protector of the Slavic Orthodox peoples. In the context of Pan-Slavism, which had been added to the Russian ideological arsenal from 1846, it became involved in a war with the Porte, which resulted in the Treaties of San Stefano and Berlin (1877) [47].

Russophobia dominated the English political scene and public debate during the 19th century. How cultural and religious diversity was treated and the shaping of public perceptions and beliefs was a function of geopolitical and economic aspirations. The Russian Empire was seen as an Asian, authoritarian, brutal and expansionist state, not fond of trade, with uncivilized subjects and a religion full of prejudices, anachronistic and backward. It is the political Ahriman, a totally authoritarian state, where the Tsar enjoys the absolute submission of his subjects, unlike the political Ormuzd represented by the United States and the European states, which owe their progress and greatness to the development of arts and industry in a peaceful environment of freedom [48]. At the same time, the Ottoman Empire was seen as a state that, despite its internal problems, made efforts for the progress and prosperity of all its subjects. The Islamic religion was presented as tolerant of other religions, without a trace of dogmatism and claims of proselytism [49]. Some went so far as to stress the simplicity and tolerance of Islamic practice, as opposed to the "slavish superstitions" and idolatry prevalent in Greek Orthodox Christianity, which worshipped mummies [50].

However, in the British public discourse, there was also the other side that perceived Russia as a power that had made enormous progress in recent centuries in all fields, particularly in the arts, letters, and trade. This side saw the Ottoman Empire as a theocratic Islamic regime that, because of the dictates of the Quran, had remained uncivilised and backward. This regime was hostile to progress and trade and harshly oppressed the subjugated Christian populations [51]. Cobden attributes to his fellow Britons a selfish spirit that gives rise to their passion to meddle in the affairs of foreign states. In his view, the dominant

emotion towards Russia, from which all other passions against Russia emanate, is fear. The unjustified fear of the danger of infiltration of the people of Russia - those semi-barbarian tribes in the opinion of many in Western Europe - and of the possibility of another cultural destruction similar to that of ancient Rome by their ancestors [52]. Gurowski, for his part, cites as a prime example of Britain's wilful and hypocritical policy, the fervent support for the oppression of the Christian Slavic majority of the European territories of the Ottoman Empire by a reckless and uncivilised Muslim minority. He further quotes the following adage by Lord Holland (Henry Vassal - Fox, 3rd Baron Holland) in 1830:

*"The first thing is to drive the Turks back into Asia. In Europe, they have been nothing but wasters and destructionists. Nothing thrives, but everything perishes under their sway. This jealousy and dread of Russia may prop up the Ottoman Empire for a time, but nothing can keep it up long. It is rotten at the foundation and in all its parts."* [53]

France, as the main representative and supporter of the Roman Catholic Church, was hostile to the Orthodox faith and could not tolerate the primacy of the Greek Orthodox Church in the East [54]. It competed with Protestantism for influence in Western Europe and especially in the Americas. As Boynton points out, the Roman Catholic Church claims the uniqueness of its truth and the universality of its church, regarding the Pope as the sole representative of Jesus Christ on earth. In the name of Jesus, the Pope exercises authority over all and rightful control over governments and leaders, throughout the world. It is to the right and duty of global authority that Boynton attributes the efforts to overthrow the legitimate government of the United States during the American Civil War with Southern support, the intrigues in Jerusalem and Constantinople that led to the Crimean War, and the ongoing rivalry with Russia [55]. Similarly, Heard points out that, unlike the Eastern Church, the distinctive feature of the Western Church is its independent character and its domination over political leaders. He eloquently states that the Popes grabbed the scepter of the absentee emperors of the Western part of the Roman Empire and this led to them aiming for world domination of the Western Church by claiming that it was not just orthodox but Catholic also [56].

Boynton attributes the rivalry and feelings of hostility of the Western European powers towards Russia to religious diversity. To the centuries-long intense conflict between the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches. It concludes that the Russian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and American Protestant Christianity divide the world. The Roman Catholic Church, with France as its predominant representative, exercises full influence in Western Europe, the Orthodox Church, with Russia as its representative, in the East, and American Protestant Christianity in the Americas. Between the Papal and Orthodox Churches and between American Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church, there is irreconcilable enmity [57].

### **Technological**

Technology was instrumental in shaping the Eastern Question. Schem sees one of the reasons for the decline of Ottoman power as the enormous progress of military science in the European states [58]. According to Toynbee, even though after the disastrous defeats of 1699 and 1774 the Ottomans realised the necessity of modernising and westernising their military system, they did little over the next two centuries [59].

The industrial revolution brought about a number of social, economic and technological changes in Britain and then in Europe and North America. The operation of new machines increased productivity and reduced production costs. However, it also made competition for raw materials more intense and fiercer. The invention of the steam engine and the development of railroads and steamships improved transportation. The progress of rail transport played a decisive role in increasing the power and influence of the great powers of the time. The Russian Empire succeeded in connecting its vast territories by making significant progress in domestic industrial production and opening up new avenues of trade and influence on the Asian continent. The German Empire, with the construction of the Baghdad railway linking Berlin to the Persian Gulf, also started becoming a threat to British interests.

The construction of steamships and, after 1860, ironclad ships with modern guns increased the value of naval power and the ability to control the sea routes. In the mid-1890s the Russian Empire ranked third among European states in fleet size, behind Great Britain, which remained a sea power, and France [60]. The opening of the Suez Canal - a huge engineering project - gradually shifted the geopolitical balance, increasing the strategic importance of Cyprus and Egypt. To secure its economic interests by exploiting the great waterway, Great Britain turned the Mediterranean into the British Sea by expanding its presence through the occupation of Cyprus and Egypt. France responded to the British moves by extending its influence in the Maghreb, Spain in Morocco, Italy in Libya, and the Aegean islands, while Germany was interested in Constantinople and the Asian states [61].

Since the early 20th century, the discovery of deposits, the extraction of oil in Persia, and its use by war fleets before the First World War, dramatically altered the geopolitical value of the Middle East and reshaped the context of the Great Powers' rivalries [62]. It marked the direct and decisive influence of energy interests in the Eastern Question. The shaping of the region's modern borders and political regimes was shaped by these interests.

### **The Modern or "New" Eastern Question**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked the reactivation of the Eastern Question, which had been suppressed during the Cold War. From steadily bipolar, the international system initially went through a phase of unipolarity - the "unipolar moment" of the United States' undisputed supremacy - and evolved into an unbalanced multipolar one [63]. Since the last decade of the 20th century and especially in the 21st century, the "New" Eastern Question has taken on a new and more dangerous form, while retaining the main features of the past. The redrawing of borders in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, after the fall of the Soviet empire, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the failed "Arab Spring", Islamist terrorism, and the East-West antagonisms culminating in the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war in the Middle East are the manifestations of the New Eastern Question. Hereupon, we will examine the stable parameters that suggest that the Eastern Question remains relevant, as well as the main changes that have made it even more dangerous.

### **Stable Parameters**

The center of developments in the New Eastern Question remains the same. It is the Eurasian continent. Everything that happens in Eurasia happens for influence and domination in

Eurasia. All other rivalries, conflicts, and wars are regional and simply confirm the above fact. From the conflicts in the Balkans, the fight against terrorism in the Middle East, the Arab Spring, and to the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, control and influence over this vast landmass is the disputed issue. As Brzezinski points out, for the United States the main geopolitical spoils are Eurasia. Maintaining US supremacy is synonymous with its dominance of the Eurasian continent [64].

The rivalry between West and East, between naval and land forces, remains as alive as ever. From the Greco-Persian Wars, the Peloponnesian War in antiquity, and the European empires of the 19th century to modern times, the rivalry between land and naval powers - East and West - continues. Russian efforts to secure an outlet through the Baltic to the Atlantic Ocean and through the Black Sea to the Mediterranean are as intense as they were in the 19th century. Similarly, the West's efforts to contain and restrain Russia coexist in the New Eastern Question. The containment of Russian expansion in the 21st century is based on three pillars. The military presence of the United States and NATO in Central and Eastern Europe, the decoupling of European economies from Moscow, and the complete exclusion of the Russian Federation from sea and land trade routes. Mahan's quote given above is fully valid today. NATO's eastward expansion since the early 1990s, despite assurances to the contrary, has served the purpose of Russian containment [65]. Mieroslawski's views, some two centuries ago, about excluding Russia from geopolitical dominance and influence in Eastern and Central Europe are relevant and applicable today [66]. As George Kennan and several others have argued, the implementation of this strategy on the part of the West is responsible for the start of a new Cold War that resulted in the war in Ukraine, and therefore a new security architecture is needed by not expanding NATO further east [67].

The cultural and religious parameters of the Eastern Question remain constant in modern times. The views on the otherness and cultural superiority of the West over the East, and particularly American exceptionalism and the empire of liberty over the new axis of evil, are dominant [68]. In the same way as in the classical Eastern Question, contemporary ideological and cultural differences and backgrounds are central to the West-East antagonism and even more so to the heated confrontations. The confrontation between 19th-century political Ormuzd and Ahriman is expressed today through the competition between the liberal conception that advocates the spread of democracy and open economies and Russian worldview heterodoxy that condemns Western postmodernism and seeks to build a multipolar world based on authentic values and traditional forms of spirituality. Even worse, the exchange of arguments between Richard Cobden and David Urquhart in the 19th century has been replaced today by the exchange of accusations even between the leaders themselves. An illustrative example is US President Joe Biden's characterization of his Russian counterpart as a murderer and President Putin's response claiming that the US is a murderous state [69].

The conflict between the Western Churches and the Eastern Orthodox Church is still alive today. Even if it is hidden under the cloak of the rapprochement of all Christian doctrines, the antagonism has been going on since the time of the Schism of the Churches (1054). The conflict is evident in the case of Ukraine, which is in fact divided between the western part, dominated by Catholicism, Protestantism and the Union of Brest and the eastern part dominated by the Orthodox doctrine [70].

Even worse, the Orthodox Church itself, following political imperatives and interests, has - especially since the end of 2018 - engaged in internal conflict. This conflict initially led to the breakdown and then the rupture of relations between the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow. The occasion was the granting of autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [71]. In any case, religious freedom is a popular field of geopolitical confrontation in the context of the New Eastern Question. The 19th century Russian pretext of protecting the Orthodox Christian Slavic populations of the Balkans and Eastern Europe is repeated today in the form of protection for the populations of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Just as in the 19th century, religion was used as a tool to serve geopolitical choices - as is evident from Urquhart's writings - it is used in the same way today.

### Variables

Certain parameters of the Eastern Question are inevitably changing. However, they do not alter the general characteristics of the problem. In the New Eastern Question, there has been a change in the main actors and the number of stakeholders has increased. The issue has undoubtedly taken on a global dimension, given that in modern times the world has "shrunk" compared to the past. Russia continues to be one of the main players, while the role of the British Empire has been taken over by the United States. In the post-Cold War period, the Ottoman Empire as the contestant and the prize of the competition has been replaced by the states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In particular, since 2004 the apple of discord has been Ukraine and secondarily Georgia, since 2008 [72]. The characteristics and role of the Middle East in the context of the problem have not changed significantly. In the New Eastern Question, China plays a role similar to that of the United States in the 19th century. The EU can be paralleled with the central European empires. In the whole web of antagonisms and confrontations, the big difference compared to the past is that any direct conflict between the main actors carries the possibility of the destruction of the planet.

In the economic sphere, the competition to acquire, secure, and expand the monopolies of the 19th century was conducted exclusively between state entities. The post-war global economic system and especially globalization in the post-Cold War era contributed to the establishment of global monopolies and oligopolies of multinational corporations. The geopolitical choices of states are dependent on the economic choices of multinational corporations. The current model of globalisation has favored China's economy and the liberal economic order is in deep crisis [73]. The attempt of the new Trump administration, after its election in January 2025, to change the globalization model is characteristic. The information about the intention of the car manufacturer Hyundai Motors to buy back its factories in Russia and of Visa and Mastercard to return to that country [74] is indicative of the global economic changes that are to follow shortly.

The evolution of technology has changed the form and character of the New Eastern Question. The rivalries are now global and the risk of spillover conflicts is incomparably higher and multidimensional. Globalization and modern technology make contemporary conflicts more dynamic, difficult to control, and easily escalate on a global scale. Tensions between nuclear powers increase the risk of transition to global nuclear catastrophe. In contrast to the 19th century, in modern times Eurasia is - mainly in economic terms - a connected landmass.



Technological developments in communications and transport have exponentially increased the speed, flexibility, and interchangeability of economic relations and trade. The Russian rhetoric for an “open Eurasia - from Lisbon to Vladivostok” is accompanied by actions in this direction such as the establishment of international organizations (BRICS, New Development Bank, Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, etc.) aiming mainly at economic integration and challenging the dominance of the Western financial system [75].

At the same time, the demands of modern technology have made the energy thirst of advanced countries even more intense and the hunt for the necessary energy resources even harder. The disruption of the energy supply chain caused by the war in Ukraine and the Middle East has put Europe in particular at a disadvantage. In addition to competition for oil and gas, securing reserves of rare earth minerals is a major concern for technologically advanced countries. The market for critical minerals has doubled to over 320 billion USD in the last five years and is expected to double again in the next five years. Ukraine has huge potential as a global supplier of critical raw materials. It is in the top ten, holding 5% of the world's mineral resources [76]. In a typical statement, South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said on Fox News on 19 November 2024 that the war in Ukraine is “about money”. Ukraine is the richest country in Europe, with two to seven trillion dollars' worth of rare earth minerals, essential in the 21st century [77]. The same politician on 12 August 2024, after visiting Ukraine and meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky, had stated that he had discussed with the Ukrainian President the conclusion of a future strategic agreement for the exploitation of the country's rare earth minerals, worth more than one trillion dollars [78]. One month after Donald Trump took office, negotiations and pressure to reach an agreement on the exploitation of Ukraine's mineral wealth have intensified. On February 15, 2025, at the Munich Security Conference, Senator Lindsey Graham said that a possible agreement between the United States and Ukraine on rare earth minerals would be a “game-changer” to strengthen the US government's support for that country [79]. The Trump administration intends to take back the money it has given to aid Ukraine after the Russian invasion.

Finally, shaping public opinion in line with the interests and aspirations of the opponents is incomparably easier and faster. In the 19th century, the main source of public debate was written texts. An already mentioned example is the arguments of Urquhart and Cobden aimed at strengthening and reducing, respectively, Russophobia in the 19th century British public opinion. Today, public debate is more direct, with electronic media and especially social media. An example is Dmitry Medvedev's harsh criticism of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Paris via X on 28 July 2024.

## Conclusion

The study of the Eastern Question in the 19th century contributes to a better understanding of contemporary developments. The geopolitical and geo-economic rivalries and the corresponding ideological and cultural background remain largely unchanged. The difference today is that they are conducted with greater intensity, they have a global dimension and the potential consequences are incomparably greater. The post-Cold War world is experiencing the consequences of the New Eastern Question that emerged in the 1990s, which is currently at its peak and is set to reshape the international

system. The admission by the new US Secretary of State Marco Rubio in his first interview that the post-Cold War unipolar world was not a normal state of affairs and that we are moving towards a multipolar international system is revealing [80]. In the context of negotiating an end to the conflict in Ukraine, the intentions of Donald Trump's new administration are emerging. Eighty years after the Yalta Conference, we are marching full steam ahead towards a new Yalta, a new agreement to reshape the world order. Just as the classic Eastern Question culminated in the reshaping of the international system after World War I, so will the New Eastern Question. Besides, it would not be surprising if the historian of the future named the period after 2014 as a “new World War”.

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