

Vladimir Putin and the Patterns of “Global Power”

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Much has been reported and analysed about recent developments pertaining first to Russian President Vladimir Putin's address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 28th 2015 and shortly following that, the direct military action carried out by the Russian armed forces in relation to the conflict within Syria.

Both events, it has been claimed, formally and decisively bring to an end the de facto post-Cold War state of affairs of unipolarity; that is, one which posits the United States of America as the sole geo-political superpower that has been able to exercise exclusive and unrestrained force in various parts of the world.

It is also clear that the denunciation by Putin of longstanding American foreign policy as well as the projection of Russian power within the cauldron of Middle Eastern affairs has brought into sharp focus an aggregate of issues which taken together give the Russian leader the upper-hand, not only in regard to that geared toward the pursuit of his nation's strategic interests, but also in the realms of moral authority and legal justification.

It has left the United States reeling and presents a future laden with a mixture of threats and benefits. The threats relate to a re-ignition of a Russo-American Cold War replete with a formal drawing of global spheres of influence, the fighting of proxy wars and an ever-heightening danger of thermo-nuclear conflict.

The benefits, on the other hand, would comprehend a framework for co-operation between the United States and the nations which it presently regards as the greatest threats to its global imperium: the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.

The masterful deconstruction Putin gave before the United Nations laid bare the failings of American foreign policy during the decades succeeding the ending of the Cold War. The Russian president correctly characterised it as one abounding in mischief, negativity and hubris – an analysis which has been bolstered by the widely favourable reaction of swathes of public opinion around the world towards Russian actions against anti-government insurrectionists in the Syrian theatre as well as the unimaginative and miserly reaction from the American government.

Events have made it clear that only a genuine and unequivocal recalibration of American foreign policy rationales which have fostered coup d'états, 'colour revolutions' and wars of destabilisation will serve the purpose of moulding the world into a far less dangerous place than it is at present.

Classic formulations of theories underpinning the security systems entered into by nation

states often posit those representing 'balance of power' alignments or by an arrangement geared towards what is termed 'collective security'.

In the era of the Cold War which pitted the ideologically incompatible systems operated by the United States and the Soviet Union, each side established a military alliance of nations against the other.

Aided by the threat of mutually assured destruction by thermonuclear exchanges, the parity of the military machineries respectively of the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact achieved what some referred to as a "balance of terror".

While the world was far from being a docile place, the prevailing circumstances meant that neither 'superpower' was prone to making rash decisions so far as interfering with the sovereignty of other nations within their immediate spheres of influence.

The operation of the United Nations to which both superpowers belong provided more than a semblance of 'collective security' as was seen in regard, for instance, to the behind-the-scenes work of UN officials in combination with US and Soviet diplomats and statesmen in brokering armistices and peace accords in successive Arab-Israeli conflicts.

But with the crumbling of the 'Iron Curtain' and the onset of what Francis Fukuyama referred to as "the end of history", the previously existing international system of checks and balances became somewhat extinct.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the succeeding chaotic transformation of Russia into a post-communist society provided those holding the levers of power in Washington with the *raison d'être* to act on achieving an over-arching strategic goal; namely that of preventing the rise of another power which would challenge American dominance.

That the American system had prevailed against the challenge offered by communism also granted it the right to remould the world, if not completely in its image, in a manner nonetheless which would serve the totality of its political and economic interests.

It followed that the United States had the right to act unilaterally without cognisance of international treaty obligations or recourse to international systems of regulation while in pursuit of its aims. The 'Wolfowitz Doctrine' thus set the tone for an era of American militarism and imperialism.

Predating the "catastrophic and catalyzing event" of the September 11 attacks in 2001 which kick started a programme of armed invasions, fomenting of colour revolutions and manoeuvres geared towards destabilization was the role played by NATO in the ultimate dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia.

The United States, the undisputed leader of NATO, steered its member states into supporting its decision to stage the illegal invasion of Iraq. There was a continuum of this ethic after the expiration of the administration led by George W. Bush. The 'backseat' approach favoured by the Barack Obama presidency rode roughshod over the strict letter of the law and convention by aiding Islamist rebels in overthrowing the government of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya.

Then, also in contravention of international law, Washington oversaw the recruitment, training and financing of armed Islamic fanatics –some of them transferred from the carnage of Libya- to another theatre of Jihadist insurrection; namely that of Syria.

The consistent practice of American policy towards governments which did not consent to do the bidding of Washington was that of promoting destabilization. This has obviously been the case in regard to its relationship with Russia since that nation began charting a very different course to that which had been followed by Boris Yeltsin.

But even prior to the ascent of Vladimir Putin to the helm of the Russian Federation, the American's had breached an important protocol of the agreement to allow a unified Germany to join NATO. This entailed that there should be no expansion eastwards.

NATO has nonetheless continued to admit former members of the Warsaw Pact into its ranks and has been behind provocations on Russia's borders via the fomenting of conflicts in the former Soviet Republics of Georgia and Ukraine.

These highly dangerous intrigues along with the policy of encirclement via the deployment of nuclear 'defensive shields' are in keeping with a vital counterpart of the Wolfowitz Doctrine, namely that espoused by Zbigniew Brzezinski, an influential political thinker whose ideas are apparently much admired by the incumbent Obama.

Obama's policy via the successful efforts of US intelligence assets in fomenting dissent and eventually overthrowing the democratically elected president of Ukraine, are consistent with Brzezinski's strategy of pressuring and intimidating Russia with the end of reducing it to a vassal status by balkanising it and ensuring that it does not in concert with any other nation form a Eurasian power bloc that could challenge the economic domination of America and the Western European world.

In many ways, Putin's speech before the UN General Assembly, a brief and clear summation of the ills caused by the untrammelled exercise of American power, performed the feat of turning history on its head.

Here after all was the leader of the successor state to the "Evil Empire" giving a moral lecture to the presumed leader of the "free world". The "Evil Empire" phrase, coined by US President Ronald Reagan had a great degree of resonance because of the obvious failings of the Soviet system in terms of its poor record in guaranteeing individual freedom. The oppressive apparatus wielded by the Soviet state towards its own citizens extended to its iron-fisted response to dissent within its satellite states.

Putin, a man often taken to task for his description in 2005 of the fall of the Soviet Union as the "greatest geo-political catastrophe of the twentieth century" was honest enough to admit the following:

We should all remember the lessons of the past. For example, we remember examples from our Soviet past, when the Soviet Union exported social experiments, pushing for changes in other countries for ideological reasons, and this often led to tragic consequences and caused degradation instead of progress.

His exposition on the failure of American policy was concise and difficult to contradict. The host of disasters which have followed in the wake of the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 are clear for all to see, just as is the reduction of Libya from a nation with Africa's highest

standard of living to the broken down rubble of warring militias that it is today.

The fracture of civil society and creation of chaos in those nations is being replicated manifold in the tragedy of Syria that again is authored by the United States with the connivance of its NATO allies and friends in the Gulf Cooperation Council.

As Putin put it:

Instead of bringing about reforms, aggressive intervention rashly destroyed government institutions and the local way of life. Instead of democracy and progress, there is now violence, poverty, social disasters and total disregard for human rights, including even the right to life.

The neoconservative idea of purportedly exporting democracy to Middle East through the barrel of a gun or bomb-bays of military aircraft continues, heedless of Robespierre's warning about the fear and resentment inspired by "armed missionaries".

The United States has cynically utilised Sunni Islamist militias adhering to the ideology espoused by al Qaeda as its 'shock troops'; a kind of a foreign legion tasked with bring down the secular regimes of the Arab world as well as the Shia powers not disposed to following the agenda set by Washington. This amounts an unholy alliance with groups of the sort that reportedly were at the root of the disaster of September 11, 2001.

To this Putin offered the following:

The situation is extremely dangerous. In these circumstances, it is hypocritical and irresponsible to make declarations about the threat of terrorism and at the same time turn a blind eye to the channels used to finance and support terrorists, including revenues from drug trafficking, the illegal oil trade and the arms trade.

It is equally irresponsible to manipulate extremist groups and use them to achieve your political goals, hoping that later you'll find a way to get rid of them or somehow eliminate them.

I'd like tell those who engage in this: Gentlemen, the people you are dealing with are cruel but they are not dumb. They are as smart as you are. So, it's a big question: who's playing who here? The recent incident where the most "moderate" opposition group handed over their weapons to terrorists is a vivid example of that.

We consider that any attempts to flirt with terrorists, let alone arm them, are short-sighted and extremely dangerous.

Putin went on to plead for a re-institution of the collective security system. In other words, he called for an end to American unilateral action and a return to the co-operative basis on which the principles of the United Nations system for ensuring multi-state security is predicated.

The reason for his call for cooperation is not hard to fathom. Russia as with China has sizeable Muslim populations which can pose internal security problems if the Islamic State strain of fanaticism is allowed to spread.

An enduring Islamic State in the Levant which is subject to measures aimed at merely

containing it provides a global threat to all; a threat to those Western European nations with rising Muslim populations and indeed Muslim states around the world.

The inexorable logic behind the call for collective action must be obvious to all. Putin was clear in his plea for a break with the unipolar mode by not merely calling for the revival of the UN as a valid conduit for fostering international cooperation, but also specifically for an alliance of the sort last seen with the anti-Hitler coalition of the Second World War.

Yet, the response from Washington has been largely marked by cynicism and continued hostility. On the one hand, such reaction confounds the mind of the objective bystander who cannot fathom why a common cause cannot be made against a dreaded foe such as the Islamic State.

On the other hand it is illuminating. The conclusion drawn by the objective observer is that the reluctance to create a unified and concerted effort against the Islamic State and other similar hues of forces fighting against the Assad government is that the militants are serving the geo-strategic interests of the government of the United States.

The abject failure in building a viable opposition political movement and a 'Free Syrian Army' are palpable when the official investment yield of a \$500 million dollar investment is a paltry five guerrillas.

Whereas in the past, the abstract principles governing the legality of intervention and non-intervention were sufficiently blurred by the legitimacy conferred on a genuine and sizeable anti-government movement, the situation in Syria does not permit this. The anti-Assad contingents of guerrillas are largely composed of imported Jihadis.

Experts such as Professor Stephen Cohen insist that there are no credible entities which can be referred to as 'moderate rebels'; an appellation which has been subject to much derision. Further, the Assad government has a great deal of support from the Sunni majority including that of the Grand Mufti of Syria.

It needs to be reminded that it is the Assad government which has borne the brunt of fighting Islamist fanatics, and that his secular regime presents the only hope for maintaining a Syrian state which will protect religious minorities including Christians from an ominous fate under an Islamic State.

Claims by Washington that the Assad government lacks legitimacy are not credible given that he won an election in June of 2014. The United States, of course, in 1864 underwent an election during its own civil war when the electoral votes of eleven Southern states were not counted.

Neither can Washington's contentious claims of the deliberate use by the Syrian Army of barrel bombs against civilian targets be used to argue the case for illegitimacy. It is an accusation reeking of hypocrisy given the numerous innocents killed by United States drone warfare, bombings and other military attacks, some involving the targeting of civilians with depleted uranium munitions.

It is clear that Washington hopes that the demonization of Vladimir Putin for which much of the Western media has been complicit, will discredit his message.

Putin it seems alternately inspires dread and hope: From anti-Russian Central and Eastern

Europeans eternally unforgiving of the historical domination of their homelands by Russian and Soviet empires to the White Nationalists that tout him as the 'saviour' of the white race.

From the archetypal 'liberal' Westerner inculcated with years of anti-Putin propaganda portraying him as the quintessential practitioner of a Russian brand of oriental despotism to the Western 'Leftie' still besotted with Russia or, at least, enduringly sympathetic to the role Russia played in attempting to set up a Marxist utopia.

But whatever the point of view, the argument for a return to a collective security arrangement based on mutual interest is difficult to displace given that American dominance has not been exercised with benevolence. Putin has already demonstrated a high level of statesmanship in averting an American bombing campaign against Assad's forces back in September of 2013 after the chemical attack in Ghouta.

The negotiated programme for collecting and destroying Syrian chemical stocks alleviated the need for this, much to the relief of war-weary legislators and their constituents in both the United States and Britain.

This was a noteworthy example of the benefits of multi-state co-operation of the sort which Washington has seemingly chosen to forswear. The suggestion by Putin of the formation of a Russo-American coalition against the Islamic State and other Islamist militias deserves consideration rather than contempt.

A re-orientating of the global patterns of power is long overdue. And given the state of the world after decades of effective unipolarity, it can only be for the better.

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