



US, Russia, and the World: The Passing of Empires

"Zwei Reiche werden blutig untergehen, Im Osten und im Westen, sag' ich euch."

- Wallensteins Tod, Friedrich von Schiller

By Rodric Braithwaite



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Introduction

One cannot assess an opponent or base a policy on a mixture of ignorance and indignation.

Ray Garthoff, one of the shrewdest American analysts of Soviet affairs, once wrote: 'The principal fault of the process of assessing the adversarywas the inability to empathize with the other side and visualize its interests in other than adversarial terms'. But, he added, an American official who departed from 'the implicit stereotypical Cold War consensus' risked damage to his career and influence. Milt Bearden, a CIA officer who spent his career opposing the Soviets, said after it was over: 'We didn't realise how f**** scared Soviet leaders were of us'.²

That was quite an admission of failure. We should not repeat it as we look at Mr Putin.

The End of Empire in the West

In his January 1992 State of the Union address, President Bush Snr said: 'By the grace of God, America won the Cold War. ... A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and preeminent power, the United States of America. And they regard this with no dread. For the world trusts us with power, and the world is right. They trust us to be fair and restrained. They trust us to be on the side of decency. They trust us to do what's right'.

This was, of course, an illusion, but America was able to sustain it for nearly a decade, during which an increasing number of people seemed willing to adopt Western ideas of democracy, liberal economics, and the ideas of globalisation.

In the 1990s, under the slogan 'Europe Whole and Free', the Americans set out to bring the benefits of NATO membership to every country in Europe. By 2009, NATO had expanded its membership from 16 to 28. For its existing members, a

driving motive (though rarely stated in public) was a feeling that they had a duty to support countries which had been allies or constituent states of the Soviet Union and feared a Russian revanche. Neither the Americans nor the Europeans seriously considered whether they had the resources, let alone the political will, to defend the new members should a serious Russian threat materialise. They thus risked offering the new members a fraudulent guarantee of the kind France and Britain gave to Poland in March 1939.

The new century began to undermine the dream, though few in the US realised that at first. On the contrary, the neocons in the new administration of George W. Bush believed American power could be used to liberate peoples who were desperate for democracy, American style.

However, 9/11 was a wakeup call. It demonstrated that America's enemies were not prepared to be overawed by its overwhelming military power. The Americans reacted by attacking Afghanistan and Iraq. They secured stunning

¹ 'Two empires will go down in blood, I say: The Eastern and the Western one as well'.

² Garthoff R, *Assessing the Adversary*, Washington 1991, p.51; Barrass G, *The Great Cold War*, Stanford 2006, p.379

victories on the battlefield, but they did not win the wars. People at home lost their enthusiasm for sending American soldiers to die in distant places. Some say that if Obama had not been so supine, defeat could have been turned into victory. They resemble those who still believe that the Vietnam War could have been won if the military had been given a free hand.

The End of the European Dream?

The Europeans saw their Union as a new kind of counter-empire, a model of prosperity and peace for other regions throughout the world.

The EU shared the slogan 'Europe Whole and Free'. It set out to bring the benefits of membership to every country in Europe which met its democratic criteria - criteria which it did not always apply with the necessary rigour. By 2013 the EU had expanded from 16 to 28 members. The risk that the EU would suffer the fate of Aesop's bullfrog, and puff itself up until it burst, was roundly dismissed by most observers.

In the early 1990s the EU began to transform its customs union into a single market. This entailed sweeping away national boundaries to the free movement of goods, services, and people. Those who worried about the impact of increased immigration on jobs, housing, and social services were told that they were economically illiterate. *The Economist* said that ordinary British people, at any rate, would manage any problems with their customary tolerance. As so often, *The Economist* was wrong.

In 1999 the EU adopted a common currency, the Euro. But it failed to solve the fundamental problem: for a monetary union to work, one must have a fiscal union backed by a political union and accompanied by a willingness on the part of the rich members to help the poor. The Americans solved the problem following their Civil War. The Europeans hoped they had solved the problem by having their civil war in advance.

The European project had necessarily begun in the aftermath of war as an elite project. The elite realised that it would soon need the instruments of democratic legitimacy. They provided for a European Parliament, continent-wide elections, and a measure of national control by democratically elected national governments. It was, they said, for the peoples of Europe to take proper advantage of

these new institutions. These institutions failed to convince, but criticisms that the EU was losing touch with the people on whom it ultimately depended were dismissed.

For the European Union, the wakeup call was the economic crash in 2008. The resulting crisis threw up the flaws in the Eurozone as the Germans found themselves paying for what they saw as the feckless habits of the Southern members, and the Southerners, in turn, increasingly rebelled against the austerities imposed on them, as they believed, by Germans and by international financiers. The crisis was exacerbated by the influx of refugees fleeing turmoil in the Middle East. Latent prejudice against Brussels, foreigners, and an elite apparently deaf to the popular mood, came into the open not only in Britain, but even in the six original founding members. Political chaos and popular resentment grew in France, Holland and Italy. Even Mrs Merkel had trouble in stemming the tide.

Europe's claim to be a model for the world was severely dented.

The Eastern Empire Ends in Geopolitical Catastrophe?

For most people outside the Soviet Union - the peoples of Eastern Europe who had had communist governments foisted on them after 1945, the peoples of Western Europe who had lived with the fear of Soviet invasion, and people everywhere who feared a nuclear catastrophe - the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union were an unmitigated blessing.

Some people inside the Soviet Union saw it the same way, especially the Balts, Ukrainians, Georgians and others for whom it was the key to national independence. Russians too were glad to see the end of the nuclear confrontation and, at first, many of them were glad to see the back of Communism and the end of empire.

So when in 2005 Vladimir Putin called the Soviet collapse 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the Twentieth Century', most people in the West could not understand what he was talking about: it was surely beyond doubt that the world was better off without the Soviet Union.³

Neither Putin nor the many ordinary Russians who had thought of themselves as patriotic Soviet citizens wanted a return to Stalin and the Gulag. But to them the collapse

³ Putin made this remark in an address to the Federal Assembly on 20 April 2005 (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>. Accessed 18 October 2016)

had indeed come to feel like a catastrophe. Even those who had hated Communism and who knew perfectly well what crimes had been committed in its name were appalled by the humiliation, confusion, poverty and hardship which now engulfed their country. One of the two arbiters of world history had been destroyed almost overnight - some said, by treachery. Paranoia, never far below the surface, began to bubble up again.

Under Putin, the Russians began to reassert their position in the world. They could not compete with the Americans or, increasingly, with the Chinese in economic power or technological prowess. But they still had one of the two most powerful nuclear armouries in the world and a geographical position which allowed them to intervene if they wished in the countries around their periphery. Moreover, they had an increasing capacity to do so as military reform began to take root. They began to push their luck, first in Georgia in 2008, in Crimea and Ukraine in 2013-4, and then in Syria in 2015. Ordinary Russians exulted that their country was back in business.

The West reacted with exaggerated panic, even though it retained overwhelming military and economic power. NATO took a surprisingly long time to respond by putting token military forces - a mere tripwire - into Poland and the Baltic States. The Russians called that a provocation. But Putin should have sacked any adviser who failed to warn him that this was a possible, even a likely, reaction.

What's Next for the New World Order?

THE AMERICANS AND THE RUSSIANS REBUILD THEIR MILITARY

The replacement of the Soviet Union by Russia led to a drastic cut in military spending from around \$246 billion in 1988 to \$14 billion in 1994. Weapons production tailed off. Much military equipment had been produced - and many bases and testing grounds were situated - in parts of the Soviet Union that were now independent countries. There were few spares available for maintenance and defective equipment was not replaced. Funding for weapons design teams was also drastically cut, and there was a growing shortage of people qualified to service the weapons that remained or to dismantle those that were withdrawn from service. The Director of one of the country's most prestigious

weapons development laboratories committed suicide in despair at his inability to pay his staff.

This was not a situation that any government was likely to tolerate for long. Putin's plans to rebuild Russian military power were supported by most Russian politicians, and indeed by many ordinary Russian people, who felt that Russian military might had declined far below what a great country needed for its defence and for its self respect. After the poor performance of the Russian military in the brief war with Georgia in 2008, Russia embarked on a major programme of defence modernisation which was expected to cost some \$700 billion by 2020, including: four hundred new intercontinental ballistic missiles, eight nuclear missile submarines, and a new heavy bomber armed with a long-range cruise missile. This was an ambitious programme. The government was determined to keep a firm grip on military expenditure, but the continuing fragility of the economy left a question mark.

Unlike the Russians, the Americans were able to keep their qualified teams of scientists and weapons designers and manufacturers together. In 2011 President Obama announced a programme to modernise the American nuclear arsenal which foresaw the construction of a hundred new strategic bombers, twelve new ballistic missile submarines, four hundred new ICBMs and at least a thousand new cruise missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads. It was expected to start in 2020, and to cost \$350 billion in the first ten years and about \$1 trillion over the thirty years it would take to complete. This was substantially more than what the Russians were intending to do.

In a programme they called Prompt Global Strike, the Americans planned to deploy over a thousand highly accurate hypersonic cruise missiles by 2025. These were intended to carry a conventional or nuclear warhead half way around the globe in a matter of minutes, kill terrorists, evade missile defences, and wipe out foreign governments and their command-and-control systems.

By 2015 the United States was spending \$597 billion dollars a year on defence. China was next, with \$145 billion. Despite its burgeoning military programmes, Russia was still only spending \$42.8 billion, less than Saudi Arabia or Britain.⁴

THE CONTINUING NUCLEAR CONFRONTATION

In the last years of the Cold War, the number of warheads held by the US and the Soviet Union tumbled as both sides

⁴ Figures from World Military Balance 2016, Institute of Strategic Studies, London. The Stockholm International Peace Institute 2016 Fact Sheet has somewhat different figures: in particular it says that Russia spent \$66.4 billion (5.4% of GDP). But the orders of magnitude are the same. See also Wikipedia article https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_military_expenditures#External_links.

realised they had far more than they needed for deterrence. In 2010, speaking in Prague, President Obama pledged America's commitment to seek a world without nuclear weapons.

His words were no more prophetic than those of his predecessors. The American military continued to argue that the United States needed to be able to deter an adversary, or if that failed, to fight a variety of nuclear wars. The Russians, British and French still spoke of the need to retain an adequate deterrent in a dangerous world. None were willing to reduce their arsenals to zero despite their obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

So the Russians still have 7300 warheads, the Americans have 7100. The Americans retain nearly two hundred nuclear bombs at six air bases in Europe. The Russians have moved nuclear-capable *Iskander* mobile missile launchers close to their Western borders. Both countries still keep half their strategic forces on high alert. Next come the French with 300, the Chinese with 260, the UK with 215, the Pakistanis with 140, the Indians with 110, the Israelis with 80, and the North Koreans with eight warheads.

The relationship between Russia and the US has deteriorated in a welter of accusation, counteraccusation, and military adventure. Commentators on both sides speak irresponsibly about ways in which nuclear weapons might be used. In February 2016 the BBC ran a sensationalist programme entitled *World War Three: Inside The War Room*. It started with simulated images of the Russians invading the Baltics, continued with a Russian nuclear strike against a British aircraft carrier, and ended with a distinguished panel of British observers voting on whether they would fire off their *Trident* missiles against Russia in retaliation (they voted against).⁵ In one of many similar comments, Russian TV anchorman Dmitry Kiselev said in March 2014 that 'Russia is the only nation capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash', which is true enough. He was speaking about Russia's ability to retaliate even after an American first strike, but his remarks were taken in the West out of context, and interpreted as a threat.⁶

Most of this is froth. Responsible politicians in the US, Russia, and Europe are far more circumspect. A nuclear exchange is even less likely than it was at the time of the hair-trigger confrontation of the Cold War. But the atmosphere is one in which mistakes could nevertheless occur.

THE FUTURE OF NATO

Trump has demanded that the Europeans pay more for their own defence, and has hinted that America will not defend the Baltic states. The European shortfall is not as great as people imagine. The current figures for NATO are:

Manpower Totals (active): 3,585,000, of which US 1,369,532;
Manpower Totals (reserve): 3,745,000, of which US 850,880;
Expenditure Total: \$904 billion, of which US \$595 billion.

The problem is that, for the most part, European forces are poorly equipped, trained, and deployed. There is everything to be said for doing something about that.⁷

This is not a new problem. In the 1970s there was considerable pressure in Congress to cut US forces in Europe because the Europeans were not doing their share. The move failed because America was defending Europe for its own ends, because abandoning it to the Soviet Union would have been a colossal political defeat, and very expensive in terms of lost investments, among other things.

The end of the Cold War made the issue less urgent. But with Russia back in the game NATO begins once again to look like a necessary insurance against the threat from the East. If NATO does not do what it can to secure the Balts, it will lose all credibility. It will also lose credibility if it tries to add to its obligations by taking in Ukraine and Georgia as it promised to do in 2008. But that now seems unlikely to happen.

THE EUROPEAN UNION

The upheaval in Europe is more worrying than the question mark over NATO. The founding fathers of the EU had the vision of an ever closer political and economic union, which would put an end to the wars which had so devastated the Continent. It was a noble vision, and it was supported by Americans who thought it should be possible to put together a United States of Europe on the analogy of the United States of America.

The analogy was false. The states of Europe were too different from one another in language, political culture, history and wealth. It is unlikely that even the original Six members would have been able to construct a real federation. With enlargement to 28, the project became impossible.

Meanwhile, the EU is ceasing to be a role model for the rest of the world. Its foreign policy instruments have been enlargement and the extension of preferential agreements

⁵ 'World War Three: Inside the War Room' was shown on BBC Channel 2 on 3 February 2016.

⁶ Kiselev made his remarks on 11 March 2014 on the first channel of Russian TV.

⁷ Figures for NATO military expenditure from Wikipedia passim.

to its neighbours and beyond. The offer of an agreement to Ukraine was one of the triggers of the crisis in 2013, though many in Brussels would disagree with that interpretation. The EU is unlikely to take such initiatives in the near future.

The withdrawal of Britain - and perhaps of other members - could lead to the failure of the Union and a reversion to the national rivalries of the past. That would be a huge setback for Europe and its allies. Those who still adhere to the original vision of federation have failed to come up with any solutions, except more integration, which public opinion in the member states increasingly rejects. So far no one has shown the political leadership and imagination needed to solve, or at least manage, the problem.

CHINA

China's rise has been long predicted. Though sporadic, it has been sustained. Some pin their hopes on signs that the Chinese model is entering a troubled moment, but this is an illusion. China, more than Russia, is already becoming an increasingly influential, if not dominant, international player. A severe economic or political upheaval could set the process back, but only an unforeseeable catastrophe can stop it.

DONALD TRUMP

Donald Trump is now the wild card in the game. Despite all the speculation, nobody yet knows, including Trump himself, quite who he is or what he stands for.

He has pledged to 'make America great again,' but his plans are confused and contradictory. At various times he has proposed to expand military expenditure, make the Europeans pay more for their own defence, abrogate the nuclear deal with Iran, look benignly on the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan and South Korea, cosy up to the Russians, and support Assad in Syria as part of a campaign to crush ISIS. He hovers between cooperating with the other great powers and wanting to show them who is boss. His attitude towards China has been particularly wayward.

He will find that he has less room for manoeuvre on all of this than he thought. But it is too early to speculate about where he will end up.

Conclusion: A Multipolar World

George Bush Snr's dream of US hegemony no longer looks so convincing. American authority has declined not only in the Middle East, where it is becoming increasingly apparent that the Arab civil war cannot be resolved by external

intervention, but also more widely as the Chinese, the Russians, the Indians, and even the North Koreans sense an opportunity. By the time Donald Trump arrived with his promise to make America great again, the prospects for a return to American preeminence were over.

The US remains the most powerful and ingenious country in the world - economically and militarily. That is not going to change in the foreseeable future. However, its overwhelming military power, and the values of democracy and human rights for which it stands, can now successfully be challenged by states and non-state actors alike. The Chinese, the Russians, assorted Muslim factions, and even the Indians, are no longer prepared to accept the supremacy of "American", "Western", or "European" values, partly because they interpret some of the manifestations of these values as a sign of Western decadence and partly because they see them as a smokescreen behind which the West has advanced its own interests at their expense.

Mrs Merkel once accused Putin of living in the 19th century, whereas the rest of us were living in a post-modern, post-Westphalian 21st century. She was wrong. The holiday from history which began in 1992 is over. This is as true internationally as it is domestically. Voters in Britain and America are no longer willing to accept the liberal philosophy without question: there is a curious similarity between them and the Russians who came to identify democracy and liberal values with the disasters they experienced in the 1990s. We liberals - in Britain, America, and Russia - either did not hear, or refused to listen to, the fears and resentments of ordinary people.

From now on America and the West more generally will have to compete in a world which consists of several substantial players who will accept the rules only if they convince themselves that the rules work in their interest. They will not accept rules simply because others say they will be good for them. If there is to be a rules-based world (which is in the interest of almost everyone), it will have to be based on a wider consensus, which will take time to emerge.

This means that America and its friends will find themselves having to do business with leaders of whom they disapprove: Putin, Xi Jinping, and perhaps even Assad. That might be unpleasant, but it is not unprecedented. The West has, in the past, dealt when necessary with characters at least as unpleasant, such as Stalin, Mao, Qaddafi and Saddam Hussein.

The good news is that it is by no means clear that it will all end in bloodshed, as Wallenstein predicted.

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ISSN 2398-4759

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Proofreading: and typesetting
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December 2016