

The United States and its Unipolar Delusion: Implications for US-Russia Relations

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Who would have predicted that 10 years after the disappearance of the Soviet Union, US defense spending would remain at levels characteristic of the Cold War? Or that the United States would lead a campaign to push the borders of the military alliance designed to fight the Cold War, NATO, ever closer to Russia's borders? Or that the energy reserves of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and the routes by which they reach Western markets, would be understood by Washington as strategic assets that should be denied to Moscow, for fear of Russia's growing influence on Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan? Or that the United States would relentlessly pursue the deployment of ballistic missile defense, despite the opposition of not only China and Russia, but also its own NATO allies? How can we explain this Cold War behavior in the absence of a Cold War enemy?

There are three parts to a possible answer. The first two--expectations for absolute security and the conception of security as necessitating a world that looks like America--are features of American political strategic culture. The third part concerns the military-industrial complex and its associated discourse of American hegemony that dominates domestic politics in the United States today. In identifying these possible causes for the continuation of the Cold War after the disappearance of Washington's only rival, I suggest how Russian foreign policy might be crafted so as to both avert the dangers emanating from America's unipolar delusion, and help gradually do away with the delusion.

American Delusions of Absolute Security

Georgi Arbatov, writing in 1971, put his finger on one half of the story: American political culture celebrates the myth of absolute security. Situated for centuries behind perfect oceanic defenses, the United States, quite unlike its Asian and European counterparts, experienced only the most trivial threats of invasion and occupation. This state of security grace has come to seem natural to Americans, who for more than 200 years have unilaterally provided for their own security, with no reliance on others to stave off threats to the American homeland. This helps to explain Ronald Reagan's love affair with SDI ("Star Wars"). It also explains the fact that the end of the Soviet threat has not ended America's embrace of a weapons system whose fundamental logic was rejected for decades by American nuclear strategists, whose proscription was trumpeted as a great

victory over Soviet plans for nuclear superiority at the time, and whose deployment threatens to alarm allies and provoke putative enemies into a real, not illusory, arms race. In a very real sense, the resurrection of Star Wars is an effort by Washington to escape the unavoidable consequence of the nuclear revolution: US security is forever in Moscow's hands.

American Universalism

Over fifty years ago, Louis Hartz and George F. Kennan, quite independently, wrote important books in which they argued that the United States and its people are afflicted with a very troubling and consequential case of self-righteousness. This deeply-held collective belief in the superiority of American political life does not in itself imply a crusading, proselytizing foreign policy. Indeed, as both scholars point out, self-satisfied isolationism is equally consistent with this political culture as demanding that all the world accept the American way of life, "or else." But what this culture does imply, according to Kennan and Hartz, is an American foreign policy that, once engaged, adopts a universalizing mission to remake the world after its own image. Indeed, without other states just like the United States, Americans do not feel secure: their absolute security is threatened.

If one combines the American quest for absolute security with its equally strong conviction that all the rest of the world naturally wants to become the United States, it is possible to explain how US policymakers, apparently sincerely, assert that NATO's expansion to the East can worry only states with revisionist agendas in Europe. For example, an unnamed White House official on March 15, 2001, claimed that only "those who intend to blackmail us" could object to deployment of ballistic missile defenses. In other words, since the United States is obviously a peace-loving power, who can object to its deployment of defenses or the expansion of the defensive NATO alliance, other than states interested in the insecurity of others? One might note that this was precisely the attitude of Soviet policymakers in the 1960s and 70s, during the period of self-encirclement.

The Military-Industrial Complex Lives, and Votes

A most important part of American behavior in international affairs has been, and remains, the place of the military-industrial complex in American political and social life. This complex accounts for a very large percentage of the US economy. What is important, however, is that its vital parts--its bases, plants, and shipyards--are strategically located in areas of the country that evoke intense political support from Southern and conservative Senators and Representatives.

As important as this material stake in the continued production of arms and armies, is the cultural and social stake in the continued reproduction of the Cold War in popular culture and discourse. The production of the military cannot be equated with the production of

any other government program or private entrepreneur, because it materially reinforces the insights of Arbatov, Hartz, and Kennan. The military is the physical embodiment of American superiority, unilateralism, and pretensions to universalist values.

The Unipolar Disease

The Soviet collapse left the United States in a position of splendid unipolarity. How it has behaved in this position can be explained by its domestic political culture of absolute superiority and security. From the Russian perspective, this outcome has meant mostly bad news. Washington continues to insist on unilaterally advancing its own conceptions of global security, while demanding that other states (like Russia) either become like, or forever remain existential threats to, the United States. The symptoms of this malady are many, but they share the common thread of unilateral exercise of American power with only the lowest priority given to others' interests. A partial list includes NATO expansion, ballistic missile defense (BMD), the continual bombing of Iraq, the war in Kosovo, management of the global arms trade, and the pipeline politics in Central and Southwest Asia and the Caucasus, which are largely directed against Russia and Iran.

While American unipolarity has made the world a less attractive place for many states, Russia included, we should not exaggerate: the United States does not even imagine directly infringing on Russian territorial integrity or sovereignty, as it is conventionally understood. But that does not imply that Russia should welcome the continuation of US hegemony. The good news is that US unipolarity is a declining asset. Because of its fetish for unilateral and absolute security, America (seemingly congenitally) rejects any broadening of its hegemonic management to include true multilateral co-determination--whether with Europe, Japan, China, or Russia--of the international security environment. But this kind of unilateralism, while temporarily perhaps meeting Americans' cultural need for absolutism in foreign affairs, conceals the fact that US authority is slowly and surely being eroded by these actions.

In fact, it could be argued that we are witnessing a race between the gradual disappearance of America's unipolar moment through: 1) its growing loss of authority among other states in the world, including its NATO allies and Japan, not to mention Russia, India, China, Iran, *et. al.*; and 2) America's provocation of another power, say China or Russia, to confront it. In other words, US actions may create a self-fulfilling prophecy (a world that looks a lot like the Cold War it seems to have never ended prosecuting). Or, the US might wake up to the fact that it dominates the globe, and realize that sharing hegemonic management of the globe with others, including Russia, will preserve that position of dominance far longer than will its unilateral assertion. Moreover, the promised gains of such a long-term arrangement are vastly greater than the meager rewards from getting a pipeline to pass through Turkey rather than Russia.

How Russian Foreign Policy Can Help Cure the Disease

The cure for American unipolarity is definitely not the emergence of another pole, or collection of poles. Multipolarity will only increase the interventionist and militarized tendencies of American foreign political culture. Rather, Russia's best bet is to help, as subtly as possible, to expose the illegitimacy of US unilateral policy in international affairs. This means not confronting the US, but rather demonstrating--both through its own adherence to principles of international law and common practice, and by couching all opposition to US actions within that normative framework--that Washington is acting without any legitimacy in the world.

The following is a list of maxims that might guide a Russian foreign policy based upon enduring unipolarity, while working to hasten its end:

- Continue on the road of economic and political reform. Russia's domestic economic and political reforms should aim at restoring Russia's material basis for great power status;
- Do not ally with others. This will only vindicate American Cold War logic;
- Ignore Washington; embrace Europe. As far as possible, deal with Europe on questions of global politics;
- Undermine the legitimacy of unipolarity. Through its own actions--both at home (in Chechnya, for example) and abroad (in relations with Iran, for example)--Russia should scrupulously adhere to multilateral (that is, European) understandings of good conduct;
- Work to reduce threats to the United States. Russian efforts to get North Korea, Iran, and Iraq off the American list of "alarming" states (used to justify BMD, among many other unilateral absolutist security policies) could undermine the very basis of US strategy;
- Be Russia. Continue to resist America's universalist export of itself; and
- Be ironic. Russia should point out the absurdity of NATO expansion and BMD and invite the devotion of yet additional US resources to these illusory goals, being confident that neither venture fundamentally undermines Russian security.