

A Major War: Not Just Rumors

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The crisis in relations between the United States and Russia over Georgia heralds a particularly dangerous period in world affairs: the era of asymmetrical *multipolarity*. A major war between two or more major powers is more likely in this configuration than in any other model of global balance known to history. The most stable system is *bipolarity* based on the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which was prevalent from the 1950s until the end of the Cold War. The awareness of both superpowers that they would inflict severe and unavoidable reciprocal damage on each other or their allies in a nuclear war was coupled with the acceptance that each had a sphere of dominance or vital interest that should not be infringed upon.

With Brest-Litovsk and the Barbarossa in mind, Stalin “intended to turn the countries conquered by Soviet armies into buffer zones to protect Russia” (Kissinger). The Western equivalent, also essentially defensive, was defined by the Truman Doctrine (1947) Proxy wars were fought in the grey zone all over the Third World, most notably in the Middle East, but they were kept localized even when a superpower was directly involved (Vietnam, Afghanistan). This model was the product of unique circumstances without an adequate historical precedent, however, which are unlikely to be repeated in the foreseeable future.

The most stable model of international relations that is both historically recurrent and structurally repeatable in the future is the balance of power system in which no single great power is either physically able or politically willing to seek hegemony. This model was prevalent from the Peace of Westphalia (1648) until Napoleon, from Waterloo until around 1900, and from Versailles until 1933. It demands a relative equilibrium between the key powers (usually five to seven) that hold each other in check and function within a recognized set of rules that has come to be known as “international law.” Wars between great powers do occur, but they are limited in scope and intensity because the warring parties tacitly accept the fundamental legitimacy and continued existence of their opponent(s).

If one of the powers becomes markedly stronger than others and if its decision-making elite internalizes an ideology that demands or at least justifies hegemony, the inherently unstable system of asymmetrical multipolarity will develop. In all three known instances—Napoleonic France after 1799, the Kaiserreich from around 1900, and the Third Reich after 1933—the challenge could not be resolved without a major war.

The government of the United States is now acting in a manner structurally reminiscent of those three powers. Having proclaimed itself the leader of an imaginary “international community,” it goes further than any previous would-be hegemon in treating the entire world as the American sphere of interest. As I pointed out two weeks ago, the formal

codification came in the National Security Strategy of September 2002, which presented the specter of open-ended political, military, and economic domination of the world by the United States acting unilaterally against “rogue states” and “potentially hostile powers” and in pursuit of an end to “destructive national rivalries.” To that end, the administration pledged “to keep military strength beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.”

Any attempt by a single power to keep its military strength beyond challenge is inherently destabilizing, and results—sooner or later—in the emergence of an effective counter-coalition. Napoleon finally faced one at the Völkerschlacht at Leipzig in 1813. “There is no balance of power in Europe but me and my twenty-four army corps,” the Kaiser famously boasted in 1901. Within years he was also building a high seas fleet. By 1907, Wilhelmine Germany engendered a counter-coalition that prompted even traditional rivals like Britain and Russia to join forces (the latter to be replaced by the United States in 1917). And as for the most recent Griff nach der Weltmacht, by the second week of December 1941 Germany was irrevocably doomed to another defeat.

An early yet certain symptom of destabilizing asymmetry in action is the would-be hegemon’s tendency to claim an ever-widening sphere of influence or interference at the expense of his rivals. In the run-up to 1914 this was heralded by the Kruger Telegram (1896) and exemplified by the German bid to build the railway from Berlin to Baghdad (1903) and by the First Moroccan Crisis (1905). Neither Napoleon nor Hitler knew any «natural» limits, but their ambition was essentially confined to Europe. With the United States today the novelty is that this ambition is extended—literally—to the whole world. Not only the Western Hemisphere, not just the «Old Europe,» Japan, or Israel, but also Taiwan, Korea, and such unlikely places as Georgia, Estonia, Kosovo, or Bosnia, are considered vitally important. The globe itself is now effectively claimed as America’s sphere of influence, Russia’s Caucasian, European and Central Asian back yards most emphatically included.

Four weeks ago the game itself became alarmingly asymmetrical. For America it is still ideological, but for Russia it has become existential. Russia is now acting as a conservative, pre-1914 European power in seeking to protect its “near abroad.” America is acting like a global revolutionary power, whose “near abroad” is literally everywhere.

It is therefore futile for Russia to try to “manage” the crisis in a pre-1914 manner and hope for some elusive softening on the other side, because the calculus in Washington is not rational. The counter-strategy of unpredictability, exemplified by Medvedev’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, is an eminently rational response, however. It may yet force the remnant of sanity inside the Beltway to try and exercise some adult supervision over the bipartisan “foreign policy community” of smokers in the arsenal.

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