

Russia, the USA and the Emergence of a Multipolar International System

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Abstract: *The paper discusses the changing relations between the U.S.A., Russia, and the E.U. in the post Cold War period and gives evidence of the emergence of a new, multipolar international system.*

Key words: *multipolarity, uni-multipolarity, American hegemony, regional powers, Russian foreign policy, unilateralism.*

For almost half a century the international system was characterized by a great degree of polarization between the two blocks. The two superpowers created their own spheres of influence and exercised their policies within a strategic domain whose descriptive, strategic and qualitative feature was the power of balance. This systemic stability allowed small and medium powers [1] more strategic space to trade national interests and balance needs and priorities.

The end of the Cold War heralded the transformation of the world system in the absence of a balancing actor. This provided ample space for the US to advance narrowly defined national interest under the impact of the emergence of neoconservatives as an ideological force and a powerful lobby. As a result American foreign policy was exclusively constructed on the use of military force at the expense of diplomacy and multilateralism.

In terms of the international configuration of power the US is still the powerful actor that manipulates crises according to its perceived or misperceived national interests. That was evident in a series of crises such as Kosovo, Iraq and the 2006 crisis in Lebanon. At the same time the above crises illustrated blatantly that in diplomatic and strategic terms the European Union was absent in international politics. It constituted a virtual player not disposing a macrostrategic plan for political action. It has been obvious that the EU's depiction as an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military worm is more than accurate. The status of the EU as an international player and its inefficiency and dramatically limited regulatory and normative role in international politics set ontological dilemmas to Europeanists and assisted the conceptual and strategic evaluating judgements of Atlanticists.

The inability of the Europeans to project, streamline and materialise alternative solutions to regional crises illustrated the relative gains of American unilateralism and the side-effects of the asymmetric euro-atlantic relations. Ideally a strong Europe could be useful to the US, as it could assist it to put its multifaceted structural power in good use. However, this cannot materialize without political muscle and the presence of an American leadership operating outside the monolithic syndrome of a superpower. Obviously the European dwarf and the American giant have by status and capabilities different views of the world.

Europe's inability to emerge as a political actor resulted, inter alia, from the EU's crisis of legitimacy as illustrated by the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands and the side-effects of the rejection of the Treaty of Lisbon in Ireland. The Lisbon Treaty was rejected in Ireland only, but this was the only country that held a referendum.

From a uni-multipolar to a multipolar world?

The early post-bipolar world has been defined as a uni-multipolar one. This was a descriptive term of an international world order based on the preponderance of a powerful state able to project power across the globe and the existence of regional powers unable to match the US or coordinate their efforts and form a compact alliance against it. A

number of regional powers questioned American strategy of primacy [2], namely China and Russia, yet, American lead in the field of technology and military power did not allow them to effectively affect American strategic choices. American policy is considered by most Europeans unilateral and arrogant, reminding everyone of the perils of Europe being a civilian power [3]. In a way, the ability of the US to project power on a global scale has allowed it to adopt go-it-alone policies when they serve American interests even at the expense of peace. In the 2000s Republican foreign policy choices have created a psychological gap between Europe and the US, thus threatening a long-term strategic alliance. Yet, the EU's inability to act as a unitary actor in international politics has allowed Atlanticists to overlay the euro-atlantic crisis.

In the new millennium two players disposed of the abilities to act as systemic balancers, at least nominally, of the US: the EU and Russia. The former has constituted a strategic ally of the US ever since the end of the Second World War, a component of the world order supported by Washington. The latter, Russia, gradually emerged as a regional player trying to establish a sphere of influence in a geostrategic space between the Caucasus and south-eastern Europe. This constituted a threat to American grand strategy and illustrated the multilevel complexities of inter-state cooperation [4] based on complexity theory assumptions.

American strategic choices constitute defining input in a complex world order under construction in which, according to R. Jervis, *"positive and negative feedback loops tend to produce unexpected second- and third-order effects"* [5]. As a result, Russia's strategy during the post-Yeltsin era has been formulated under the impact of a number of strategic urgencies and priorities.

The first applies to the systemic level and the rejection of the concept and operational applications of norms that characterise a uni-multipolar world. Eventually in a system like this the US operates not simply as a *primus inter pares* but as a world power wishing to qualitatively formulate international politics according to American norms and values. In Europe this is what Europeanists and Russians reject. That is the americanization of the world. This is one aspect that might sovietise Russian foreign policy and turn it into negative input to European and international security equation.

The second refers to institutional diplomacy and Russian support for an UN-based world order. Moscow's policy preferences stem from the need to enhance the existing regulatory order of international organizations. It is a choice imposed on Russian leadership rather than one willingly made, since Moscow cannot, under the circumstances, claim a planetary but only a regional role.

American attitude vis-à-vis Russia in the 2000s has been a challenge to Russia's vital interests in many aspects. Washington has repeatedly criticised *"Russia's backslide toward autocracy"*. In 2006 US Vice President Cheney accused Russia of *"unfairly and improperly restricting the rights of its people and using oil and gas as tools of intimidation or blackmail against neighboring countries"*. As suggested, *"Russia has a choice to make... And there is no question that a return to democratic reform in Russia will generate further success for its people and greater respect among fellow nations"* [6]. Eventually American policy vis-à-vis Russia has been built, at least verbally, on assumptions of democratic stability theory. This is evident in Stephen Blank's suggestion that, *"the main precondition for lasting and thus genuinely productive partnership is Russia's visible and irrevocable commitment to economic-political-military democratization"* [7].

However, Valeri Ivanovich Mikhailenko suggests that a number of Russian expectations proved unrealistic, namely: first, "Russia's integration into Euro-atlantic structures", second "the immediate establishment of the strategic partnership" and third "allied relations with the West" [8]. What is more or less evident from the above evaluations is that Russia's expectations and interests were only marginally acknowledged, a fact that gradually assisted the formulation of a distinctive and reactionary strategic mentality on the part of Moscow. To many it was evident that Russia

was treated as a junior partner within the limited space of an ad hoc alliance against terrorism. Yet, the effort to expand NATO to Russia's frontiers was negatively evaluated by Russian leadership. To many it was a sign that the new world order advertised by Washington was meant to be built without Russia.

What was needed was a new framework of mutual understanding in order to free leaderships in both countries either from misunderstandings or old time strategic thinking and Cold War assumptions. Nikolai Zlobin underpins that *"it is pointless to try to improve the legacy of the cold war. We need to create qualitatively new relations. By "improving" Russian-American relations, we are only prolonging the funeral of the cold war. Today, the main challenge in Russian-American relations is the absence of an understanding of their foundations. Neither side truly comprehends the basis of their relations and their political philosophy. We need an intellectual breakthrough, a completely new understanding of Russian-American relations. One cannot form relations between the United States and Russia as an heir of the Soviet Union. Not improvement of old relations, but the formation of fundamentally new ones, should be the goal of the political elites of both countries"*. [9]

Another major point of divergence between the US and Russia is the one that refers to the perception and misperception framework and the milieu within which decisions are taken. Robert Jervis makes the distinction between the psychological and the operational milieu. The former is based on the image of the world as a state actor sees it, while the latter defines the space / the world in which a specific policy will be carried out [10]. US policy and Russian reaction is also related to the traditional international politics question of who gets what, why and how. In its simplified and practical version this refers to a process of bargaining and providing carrots in a conscious effort to establish a common strategy based on consensus.

In practical terms the above described new partnership is related to the obvious or less obvious pressures for the establishment of a multipolar world. Conventionally and historically change and continuity have defined norms in terms of conflict and cooperation in the world system. Indeed world politics have been characterized by changes and continuities. International relations scholars need to pinpoint changes to recognize the beginning of a new international system [11]. According to S. Hoffman the emergence of a new international system is related to answering a number of qualitative questions. First, what are the system's basic units? Second, what are the predominant foreign policy goals that these units seek with respect to each other? Third, what can the units do to each other with their military and economic capabilities?

The last two questions depict the interaction framework between the US and Russia and their respective foreign policy goals. Russian foreign policy appears to be more normative and puts emphasis on the merits on the UN although its policy in S. Ossetia has been evaluated as a sign of sovietization and an "overreaction". In Realist terms Russian reaction has been a clear sign of discontent to a strategy that marginalizes Moscow's interest in the region but also an opportunity to support its policy in S. Ossetia and Abkhazia. This was materialized through exploiting the strategic mistake of Mr. Saakashvili who bombed an autonomous region of its own country thus treating as a de facto alien land.

The emergence of a multipolar world is by definition a threat to American grand strategy and the aim to homogenize the world. This may be the sign of a clear or less clear effort to establish a planetary hegemony and overlay the interests of regional powers. Again the action-reaction framework points to the long-standing organizing concepts of international politics that refer to foreign policy drawing [12]. These may be epitomised in a set of questions namely:

1. How do states act?
2. How do we explain the various aspects of their foreign policy?
3. What are the main characteristics of the interaction between states?

Through a Realist perspective Russia's response to American strategy constitutes a reaction to a policy bearing features of aggressive Realism, namely expansion and hegemonic international behavior. Moreover, it is the externalization of an effort to protect values and goals in the foreign policy domain. In effect it bears aspects of a policy of survival and resistance to a policy of encirclement [13]. On its part the EU has become a factor of Russian's conceptual [mis]perception of the other side's aims due to its alignment with the US and NATO's catalytic role in European security architecture and its inability to become an actual player with political muscle in an emerging multipolar world.

The effort of the EU and the US should concentrate on capitalizing Russian potential and influence in the region. As suggested, "if Washington's chief goal is to destroy Russian influence in this region and replace it with that of the United States, it needs to remember that whatever its weakness on the world stage, in its own backyard Russia has some tremendous latent strengths" [14]. Indeed Russia constitutes a challenge to both the US and the EU yet, for Europe its status as a junior partner does not assist its effort to advance European interests. Russia is a defining parameter in the effort to deal with terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy shortages and climate change. The above provide powerful motives to include Moscow in a multilateral world order. According to John Edwards, former Democratic vice-presidential candidate and Jack Kemp, former Republican vice-presidential candidate, co-chairs of the Council on Foreign Relations, all these problems are more manageable when we have Russia on our side rather than aligned against it".

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[2] Indicatively see the analysis in Richard N. Haass, "What to Do With American Primacy", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1999.

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[13] See the declared goal of the US to open military bases in Russia's near abroad in "U.S. May Set Up Bases in Former Soviet Republics", *Washington Post*, January 28, 2004. Although the then Secretary of State Colin L. Powell suggested that the US "is not trying to surround anyone" Russian leadership appeared greatly dissatisfied.

[14] See the analysis of Anatol Lieven of the New America Foundation in Washington in "Putin versus Cheney", *International Herald Tribune*, May 11, 2006

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