

Of Belarus, China and Watching a Perfect Game Pitched

by George Friedman - August 19, 2020

There are moments in history when disparate global events combine to change the shape of the global system. People like me long for these moments, much like how baseball fans want to witness a perfect game be thrown. Even more, we want to be in a position to claim, with evidence, that we knew that this moment was coming all along. Knowing that something extraordinary will take place and then watching it take place, rather than longing to make vast amounts of money, is a form of neurosis, and a sad one at that. But we are what we are.

We are also frequently wrong. The hunger to see and predict the extraordinary often leads to wishful thinking, hoping to be the first to notice the coming apocalypse. It turns out there are more forecasts of apocalypses than actual ones. The solution is difficult. It is to be an expert on the apocalypse, yet believe deeply in your own ignorance.

This is a long-winded preface to a theory that the international system is undergoing a major shift. It's not a 1945 or 1991 shift, nor is it attributable to a single event. There are two things happening that have not fully unfolded, are disconnected, and have little to do with COVID-19. One has to do with Belarus and the other with China.

As I have written before, Belarus is a critical buffer for Russia, one that has been fairly neutral. Obviously, Russia wants to keep it that way since the eastern border of Belarus cuts deep into Russia. But the western border cuts into NATO territory, particularly Poland. In a region where the Baltics are part of NATO and Ukraine is tilting toward the West, the Russians can't tolerate a pro-Western Belarus. Nor can Poland and the Baltics tolerate a pro-Russian Belarus.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has ruled for a very long time, managing his country like a modern Leonid Brezhnev. After arresting the primary opposition candidate, he was reelected last week, and the people took to the streets in protest. They were mostly peaceful, and Lukashenko was certified to serve yet another term as president.

After the protests were joined by strikes, the future became less certain. The demonstrators clearly had support from Poland and Lithuania. So Russia, fearing another revolution like that which had

brought to power pro-Western leaders in Ukraine, another important Russian buffer state, declared its support for Lukashenko.

Meanwhile, a few days ago, an interesting thing happened in Europe. German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her thanks to Lithuania for the help it had provided the Belarusian protesters. Germany had been trying to improve ties with Russia, particularly on the Nord Stream natural gas pipeline project. Germany did not trust the U.S. at this point, nor did it want to slip into a confrontation with Russia. Russia, for its part, had hopes for its relationship with Germany. The expression of thanks to Lithuania (and the interesting exclusion of Poland from the thanks) placed Germany in direct opposition to Russian interests.

The Russians cannot live with the loss of its last western buffer state, nor the possibility of potentially hostile forces near Smolensk so close to Moscow. That no one wants this may be the case, but history consists of shifting intentions. Russia is not likely to accept the word of Poland or Germany. It would have to assume the worst and take action to reverse events.

This is the major flashpoint of Europe, the place where the European peninsula meets the European heartland. It is a region that has seen many wars, localized and systemic. Each was ultimately defeated by strategic depth. Russia cannot lose Belarus after losing the Baltics and Ukraine. Germany is today a liberal democracy with little military power. So was Germany in 1932. Things change.

Common sense says this will not end in a major conflict. Unemotional reasoning says there is no basis in history for such complacency. And if a far-fetched conflict emerges, Europe, one of the anchors of the international system, will change dramatically and unpredictably.

Which brings us to our second event. From the COVID-19 pandemic to the disrepair of the Three Gorges Dam, from Hong Kong to the Himalayas, not to mention a trade spat with its biggest customer, China has substantial problems. All political leaders have their opponents, but in China the opposition is kept in house. It is therefore interesting that Cai Xia, a professor at the Central Party School, delivered a lecture saying President Xi Jinping was “killing the country” and that his unchecked power made him an enemy of the world. She was fired, after which she gave interviews to Western media saying the same thing.

It is not the sentiments that are striking; it's that they were delivered by a professor at a high-profile Communist Party institution. China is not a liberal democracy, and though it is well past the terror of Mao, a senior party member doesn't normally make such statements.

There are two possible explanations. One is that China is liberalizing. The other is that Cai has powerful support in the Central Committee. If it is strong enough to allow these attacks, then there is a question of just how powerful Xi is. My view is that the various problems that China has faced has emboldened his enemies such that they are attacking him publicly. If that's true, it's significant. I need to add that my colleague, Phillip Orchard, does not agree with me. He argues that Xi remains powerful and that not too much should be read into Cai's statement.

He may be right. Common sense tells me he is. But my analysis forces me to conclude that a power struggle (which I expected) can no longer be contained within the Central Committee and has now gone public. And if there is a power struggle, then the direction of China on a range of global issues is up in the air.

The assumption of the world has been that Europe is obsessed with economics and indifferent to geopolitics. The assumption about China is that it has become a great power and challenger to the United States. My view is that Europe has been on vacation from history, and that it will end, and that China's pretense to power is unsustainable. If we were to hit the jackpot with two of the global centers of power changing their behavior, then the world would indeed change.

I can't make that call but neither can I dismiss that Belarus is a battle waiting to be launched, and that contrary to Phillip's view, China is nearing a shift in its behavior.

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