

Still a Unipolar World

by George Friedman - October 18, 2022

In recent weeks, Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the United States is trying to impose a new world order, one designed to control Russia, China and Europe, as well as the lesser powers of the world. It's tempting to write it off as the ranting of a leader at war, but there's more to it than that. Ignore the fact that Washington's seeking a unipolar world assumes a level of planning that runs counter to the American reality. What Putin is trying to come to terms with is that in planning for war in Ukraine, Moscow completely misunderstood the nature of the world.

Specifically, Russia misunderstood American subtlety. The United States did not commit major military force to block Russia's advance, nor did it cede any part of Ukraine. The United States understood the threat posed by Russia on the border with NATO – that is, a new Cold War – and it understood Ukraine better than Russia did. So it sent massive amounts of weapons to Ukraine, the power and sophistication of which could not be matched. It struck blow after indirect blow.

Moscow also failed to understand America's relationship with Europe. Time and again, Europeans bemoaned that Washington had abandoned its European commitments. That that was never the case didn't stop U.S. think tanks from validating the idea, nor did it dissuade Russia from believing it. In times of peace, the U.S. could do without the prior relationship with Europe, bickering over trade rules and Russian energy dependence. But when the war broke out, the relationship rapidly transformed. Germany, for example, did not value Russian fuel as much as it valued American security guarantees. The Europeans knew that Russia could hurt them, and they did not really trust the Russians, but when push came to shove, they knew American interests lay in Europe. Putin, I think, was stunned when he learned the Germans stood with the Americans. He lacked a sophisticated understanding that there are different types of power and that the power projected by Russia was too blunt to work. Putin could not understand the power of appearing uncertain.

Still, the worst mistake Putin made concerns the U.S. relationship with China, a country in deep economic crisis. Moscow could neither hurt nor help China. The U.S. can do both – help by increasing investment and buying more goods, and hurt by blocking the sale of, say, certain microchips. China believed it did not need the United States to recover, and it convinced itself that Washington could be intimidated by naval and related power. Instead, Beijing discovered that its threats around Taiwan and other areas simply generated more vessels and weapons to be deployed

against it. The utility of an alliance with Russia was shattered by the realization that the U.S. could respond militarily in Ukraine and, simultaneously, in the South China Sea.

All of this should have been obvious, and I think China was more aware of U.S. capabilities than Russia was. Chinese President Xi Jinping knew when to cut his losses. Putin kept doubling down. This seemed to be validated over the weekend by a spokesman for the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, whose statements were paraphrased by China's Global Times newspaper as follows:

"If one of the most important events in international relations in the past 50 years is the restoration and development of China-U.S. relations, which has benefited both countries and the world, then the most important thing in international relations for the next 50 years is that China and the U.S. must find the right way to get along with each other. The key for China and the U.S. to find the right way to get on with each other is mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation proposed by General Secretary Xi Jinping. Common interests between China and the U.S. far outweigh differences, and a sound and stable China-U.S. relationship serves the common interests of the two peoples."

We are used to China hurling threats at the United States. Now, it is searching for ways to accommodate the U.S. It has noted the American performance in Ukraine, both subtle and brutal, and has decided that an alliance with the U.S., however loosely defined or temporary, is far more attractive.

It's no surprise, then, that Putin sees the U.S. as a force trying to create a unipolar world, because in some notable ways, it is a unipolar world. The U.S. is the largest economy in the world, its current problems notwithstanding. It also has a sophisticated military, able to bring overwhelming force to bear, train an army at war in new weapons, and use subtle force to shape the world. American power isn't absolute, and it can be outstripped. But it is sufficiently mobile to act sequentially when simultaneous action is impossible. Put simply, the United States is the most powerful economic and military force in the world – when it chooses to act. Inaction can be confused by men like Putin as weakness. The U.S. has learned that with its inherent power it has time to react.

The American public often sees the United States as weak and mismanaged. There's a tendency to label Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush as criminals or morons or both. The same charges were levied against Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. Contempt for the commanders-in-chief is a prerequisite, to prevent tyranny, even if it has its drawbacks. The America First movement opposing U.S. participation in World War II

interfered with Roosevelt's ability to make decisions. It had a direct impact on Pearl Harbor and caused a painful initiation for the U.S. into war by the Japanese, which of course ended in catastrophe for them.

The perception of American weakness is a global one, shared even among Americans. Being underestimated has its uses, as does sporting a public that doesn't trust its president. But only enormously powerful nations can afford the contempt. The past few months haven't taught us that the United States is finagling a new world order. It's taught us that Russia is weakening, that China is managing its relationship with the U.S. carefully, and that the international architecture created after World War II, though more complex, essentially remains in place. It is a unipolar world.

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