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Turbulent Peace:

The United States Role in a Dynamic World

by Michael Mandelbaum

Conclusions

- Global conflicts are unlikely in the near future because rivalries among the great powers have been reduced and the great powers have less need to become involved in peripheral states.
- The current, if uneasy, harmony that exists among the great powers was fostered by the collapse of communism as a militant ideology, by the emergence of economics as a primary emphasis of governments, by nuclear weapons, which made war exceedingly dangerous, and by the spread of democracy.
- Democratic great powers favor the tranquility of the post-Cold War era and they are unlikely to seek dramatic change. One development that could change the *status quo* is European political unity, which would almost inevitably exclude Russia; however, such unity is unlikely in the near term.
- Russia and China, the great powers that are not fully or irrevocably democracies, are the great post-Cold War question marks. Political uncertainty and the continuing vibrancy of nationalism, combined with irredentist claims, mean that the need to rally political support at home can lead to assertive international rhetoric and action.
- Conflicts within and between peripheral states are the source of most turbulence in today's world. Most of these conflicts have little real importance to the great powers. However, nuclear proliferation among peripheral states is a source of instability the great powers cannot overlook.

A Time of Comparative Peace

The post-Cold War era, although scarcely free of violence, is freer of the danger of a world war than any other time in modern history. For this there are two reasons.

First, at present the traditional great power rivalries that have given rise to great wars do not exist. The international system is more peaceful than ever before at its core, centering on the five great powers: the United States, Western Europe, Japan, China, and Russia.

A second reason for this unprecedented peace is an historically unusual disjunction between the core--the major powers--on the one hand, and the periphery--everyone and every place else--on the other.

The reasons for the unusual harmony among the major powers are familiar, but bear repeating. First is the collapse of communism as a militant ideology stressing the inevitability of international struggle.

A second reason is the primacy of economics--virtually all core governments emphasize domestic economic growth. Moreover, the rise of the market as the principal method for organizing economic activity within, between, and among most countries has promoted international harmony. According to market principles, the control of territory is not the key to wealth, which comes instead from participation in the international division of labor. Insofar as this principle is accepted by sovereign states, one of the major incentives for war disappears.

Yet a third reason for post-Cold War tranquillity, carried over from the Cold War period, is the presence of nuclear weapons. They make war exceedingly dangerous, and thus dampen the incentives for conflict.

Fourth, two principles espoused by Woodrow Wilson after World War I are coming into their own eight decades later. The first is the principle that the basis for organizing sovereign states should be **national self-determination**. This principle does not always ensure peace. Struggles for national self-determination have often been bloody. Indeed, most of the wars in the world today are being fought over some version of this issue. However, where the national self-determination principle coincides with the borders of sovereign states, the result is usually a certain measure of stability. The second Wilsonian principle is **the spread of democracy**. Wilson believed democracies were less inclined to disturb the peace and commit aggression against their neighbors than undemocratic countries. In general, with some qualifications, this is true, and it is also true that democracy is more widespread in the post-Cold War era than ever before.

Perhaps the clearest evidence and most important consequence of these two principles, from the American point of view, is that for the first time since the United States became a great power--a period that coincides roughly with the twentieth century--American policy in the Asia-Pacific region does not revolve around a clear strategic choice between China and Japan; nor, in Europe, is the United States forced to choose clearly between Russia and Germany.

Democratic Powers Favor *Status Quo*

What are the prospects for the continuation of this post-Cold War tranquillity? Western Europe and Japan, are likely to favor the military and political *status quo* now and for the future. Neither is going to take on a dramatically different role unless forced to do so. There is no domestic constituency in Western Europe or Japan for radical change. Governments in both places understand the benefits they derive from the present state of affairs.

There is in Europe, however, an important issue with the potential to change the political and strategic *status quo*: European unity.

If the European Union should achieve its goal of unifying its member states, Europe would be a different place. This is not, however, likely to occur, at least not soon. Political unity requires monetary union, which in turn requires convergence among the national economic policies of the various nations of Europe, which they are having difficulty achieving. In particular, they are having difficulty in reducing

their budget deficits to the designated three per cent of Gross National Product. The effort of the current French government to do this triggered major strikes at the end of 1995. Nor, in the end, is Germany certain to opt for monetary union despite the German government's commitment to it. The German public, all polls show, simply does not wish to abandon the deutsch mark, which European monetary union would require.

The failure to achieve European unity would be neither an economic nor a political setback. Economically, even though a single European currency would bring benefits by reducing what are known as transaction costs, it might also do damage by undermining the monetary stability that Europe enjoys thanks to the commanding role of Germany's central bank. Currently the country most committed to monetary stability, Germany, has the most power; it would have less in a Europe-wide monetary union.

European unity is unnecessary in political terms because it was and is a response to German unification, a way of containing a larger and more powerful Germany. Indeed, the project of unifying Europe was from the outset, in the early postwar period, a way of controlling Germany so as to prevent the revival of the aggressive German policies that had caused two world wars. In the post-Cold War era, however, Germany does not need to be controlled because it poses no threat to its neighbors.

Even if it were feasible, European unity, as envisioned by the Maastricht Treaty of 1991, would be unwise. It would inevitably involve excluding some European or partly European countries. One of those left out would surely be Russia. This is highly undesirable, for the most important political goal the West now has is to integrate Russia into Europe as far as possible. Given the present state of Russia's political and economic evolution, the best that can be achieved is a "multi-speed, multi-track" Europe, with Russia as part of it, even if in the farthest outside lane.

As for Japan, a higher military profile is not in its interest, something that the Japanese recognize. Indeed, Japan is too small, too dependent on the outside world economically, and too insular culturally, to play the role of an independent great power on the nineteenth century model. Japan does seek some modification in its international status, notably a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. But it will not press for a change in its geopolitical status in East Asia.

Non-Democratic Powers and Stability

If the democracies will not disturb the peace at the core of the post-Cold War international system, the same cannot be said with comparable confidence of the two great powers that are not fully or irrevocably democratic. Russia and China are the great question marks of the post-Cold War era and the potential disturbers of the peace.

There are, of course, major differences between these two countries, but they have important features in common that illustrate the roles that Russia and China are likely to play in the international system.

Both countries are large, and size matters. The larger a country is, the more independent it can be and therefore the less predictable it is likely to be. It is reasonably certain that lesser formerly Communist countries in Asia and Europe--Vietnam and Poland, for example--will fit themselves into the international orders that surround them. They will conform, broadly, to the political and economic patterns of their regions, Vietnam in Southeast Asia, Poland in Europe. But this cannot be predicted with the same confidence for Russia and China, which are big enough to resist the influences of their surrounding environment.

Neither Russia nor China is wholly or reliably stable in political terms. Both are no longer orthodox Communist countries, but neither is a well-established democracy--or even a stable authoritarian regime. Their political evolutions have not ended.

Although the primacy of economics is a factor in the internal politics of each, economic considerations are not all-powerful. Nationalism is not extinct in Russia and China. Each country's place on the world stage, its power and its prestige, still matter to the governments and peoples of both states.

Moreover, history still matters. For China, the humiliations inflicted by western imperialism remain vivid enough to be invoked by the regime in Beijing to justify the policies it has chosen. For Russia, the humiliation of the recent fall from the pinnacle of world power is similarly evocative. The combination of these two factors--political uncertainty and the continuing vibrancy of nationalism--mean that the need to rally political support at home can lead to assertive international rhetoric and action. Both have insisted on special treatment by international organizations. The Chinese have sought special terms for joining the World Trade Organization; Russia has negotiated with the International Monetary Fund for credit on terms unavailable to others.

Neither government recoils from the kind of internal repression that is entirely unacceptable to the other great powers. The glaring example in the Chinese case is Tibet; for Russia it is Chechnya.

Last, and perhaps most important for the post-Cold War era, China and Russia have actual or potential irredentist claims: China on Taiwan; Russia, potentially, in the so-called Near Abroad, the former Soviet republics that became independent countries after 1991. Potentially the most explosive relationship between Russia and one of its new neighbors is the one with Ukraine. Thus the Russian-Ukrainian border and the Taiwan Straits are the most dangerous spots on the planet. They are the places where large and dangerous wars could erupt. Global peace depends heavily on what happens in those places, and what happens more broadly to and in Russia and China.

Turbulence in Peripheral Countries

If the core is calm in the post-Cold War era, the periphery is turbulent. The most common and familiar source of turbulence however, is of little importance to the core.

The instability on display every day in the newspapers and on television involves conflicts caused by the end of the Cold War. Either a Communist empire dissolves, leaving nations and groups to squabble over the spoils, as in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, or a state collapses because it cannot get the resources to which it has become accustomed from the superpowers. It cannot get these resources because the superpowers are no longer willing (or in the case of Russia no longer able) to pay. Examples of conflicts of this kind are to be found in Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and other parts of the Third World.

These conflicts are now of little importance to the major powers. In the past, the periphery was related to the core through great power rivalry. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union intervened widely in the Third World, they competed for influence and propped up regimes, frequently there as part of their global rivalry. Without great power competition, the five great powers can afford to ignore the turbulence on the periphery.

Bosnia is the exception that proves the rule. It was difficult to ignore entirely because it is situated on the border between the core and the periphery. It both is and is not in Europe. Despite all that has happened

in Bosnia, however, there is clearly a limit to what the great powers are willing to do there. Peacekeeping seems to be all that Western publics are willing to support. Moreover, Bosnia is the exception in that there has been no suggestion that Western military forces intervene elsewhere--along Russia's southern borders, for example, where several similar conflicts are under way.

A second source of instability is rarer but more important, and could be the occasion for great power intervention. Nuclear proliferation as a source of instability on the periphery is important to the five major powers because it has the potential to alter regional balances and affect vital interests. The core, led by the United States, intervened in the Persian Gulf among other reasons to thwart the Iraqi nuclear weapons program and may yet do so for the same purpose on the Korean peninsula. Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-il present threats to core interests; Slobodan Milosevic was, by contrast, an affront to Western values.

What Role for the United States?

In view of this, what is the global role of the United States? On the periphery it is to lead the ongoing global campaign against nuclear proliferation--a complicated, multifaceted, multinational, and never-ending task, and one that the United States has led for more than three decades.

Among the major powers, the role of the United States is to do what is necessary to preserve stability, which is to maintain a military presence of some kind in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. The task of the United States, given the post-Cold War configuration of power and politics in Europe and East Asia, is to reassure the major and lesser powers of both regions that there will be no abrupt change in geopolitical conditions. In particular, it is the task of the United States to reassure the Germans and the Japanese that they will continue to enjoy protection and will therefore have no need to engage in sharp departures from their current policies, especially military policies, policies that are acceptable, indeed reassuring, to their neighbors. The role of reassurance is particularly important because in these two cases nuclear weapons are involved. The mission of American military forces in these two regions has shifted from deterrence to reassurance, which leads to a final issue.

American Public Opinion and Stability

It may be difficult to justify this new mission to the American public. To the extent that it is, the post-Cold War period may come to resemble the interwar period in that one of the great unknowns, indeed one of the front lines of international politics, will be American public opinion. In that case, the post-Cold War era will be shaped by the internal politics not only of Russia and China but of the United States as well.

Recommendations

- The United States should take whatever steps are necessary to reassure major and lesser powers in both Europe and in the Asia/Pacific regions that abrupt, violent change will not occur in geopolitical conditions.
- The United States should continue to lead the global campaign against nuclear proliferation.
- Current and future administrations will have to set forward clearly their goals, missions, and U.S. interests if their foreign policy is to secure support from American public opinion.

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