



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 437

February 6, 2019

The United States and World Order

Dr. Colin S. Gray

Colin S. Gray is the European Director and co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, and Professor Emeritus of Strategic Studies, University of Reading.

Introduction

I suspect that most Americans do not really understand just how powerful the United States is in the world. With very few exceptions the United States plays a dominant leadership role just about everywhere. This condition warrants the description hegemonic (from the Greek) so considerable is the country's lead internationally in most of the true foundations of power. With few exceptions, this American dominance has been a source of enormous net benefit to the world at large. In common with many other powers, even the United States has a few notable weaknesses, some of them, when regarded ironically, being largely a consequence of its relative greatness.

The reason behind my writing this essay is because it can be too heavy a challenge for Americans who are domestically domiciled to consider their country as it is regarded in and from the outside world. Of course there are events and episodes even, that typically bring Americans together, albeit generally only briefly. However, as often as not the American domestic scene may fairly be characterized as rather chaotic, at least apparently so. It is no easy task to endeavour to explain to foreigners what it is about the United States that truly is different from other countries. It can only be explained and possibly understood if one allows the complex interdependencies among three elements quite free play in explanation and understanding: geography, history, and culture. Each of these causal categories, when applied and interpreted in time, and also when regarded holistically, contributes vitally to



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 437 | February 6, 2019

comprehension of the American reality of today. Although one needs to avoid the hazards of unduly preclusive views of the future, it transpires that the trials and tribulations of world order in this still youthful country already are more than faintly discernible. In this essay I will attempt to explore both the dangers and the opportunities that are the notably distinctive lot of the United States.

Why the United States is Different

There is some sense in treating the United States analytically fairly simply as just a recent example of an unusually great power, condemned to perform balancing acts in both its ancient and modern forms. There is some merit in such an approach, wherein one seeks to neutralize, at least ignore the possible details of particular historical context. States, distinctive political entities at least, both rise and inevitably fall, rhythmically if not quite predictably, but fall they must. When a state is on top of its own preferred variant of world order, there can only be one direction for its competitive standoff, down!

All states weaken, collapse, and eventually disappear. There is no compelling reason why this given wisdom will not see the United States one day join once imperial Rome. As proved to be the case for Rome's Byzantine inspired successor state, there can prove to be considerable ruin in a once mighty empire. But the United States is not just a state like any other, only one that is relatively much larger than most of the rest. One can be sure that Presidents Putin and Xi are not confused by America's domestic critics into believing that the United States is really very much like all others, and worse.

Geopolitically, the United States is a maritime power, albeit one of continental size. In order to be influential in the world, Americans need first to secure and then to exercise a commanding measure of control over the approaches to their North American homeland. The relative remoteness of American physical geography is both an asset and a liability, though on balance it is a physical context that yields great advantage when considered with reference to global security concerns. In Russian perspective, for example, the United States is a nightmare of an adversary. Russia, a country almost in love with physical geography, finds itself unavoidably in strategic competition with a foe that is unreachable by land power! Geostrategically, the United States is the one for which first Soviet, then Russian, power lacked traditional answers. By the devotion of extraordinary and carefully focused effort, Russia has managed generally to stay in touch, or even more, in some technical areas of weaponry. However, the contemporary weakness of their economy means that Russian competitive endeavours in the main are almost certainly in decline. Extraordinary effort and high talent has thus far enabled Russia's success in high-technology for competitive strategic advantage, but the scale and diversity of Russian military effort is not particularly impressive. Not, at least, when it is compared with the character and dimensions of a Russian geostrategic context dominated by a maritime-air American challenge and a rapidly growing Chinese danger of a familiar continental kind. It should be noted with regard to the latter, that in contrast to the United



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 437 | February 6, 2019

States, China poses a challenge for Russia that is entirely familiar when viewed in historically lengthy geostrategic terms.

What needs to be understood here is that the geopolitics of superpower competition are maturing as one writes. The transition from a bipolar to a tripolar strategic contest among the United States, Russia and China, is a shift of seismic significance. This game is always political, but it is scarcely less strategic. These three super-states have little in common, fortunately including character of national territory. Their strategic cultures are radically different, as unsurprisingly are their means, methods, and purposes of domestic governance. Prospectively, there are grounds for worry that have a strategic edge to them concerning the problems of political comprehension that are near certain to follow from cultural asymmetry. Europe's Great Power system of management in the 19th century was serviced by a class of politicians and officials who understood a fairly common playbook of initiatives and responses: it is quite safe to observe that Putin's kleptocracy and Xi's party discipline constitute an unavoidable duo that it would be hard to invent for sharpness of contrasts with the United States.

Each member of the superpower trio has characteristically distinctive attributes and limitations that are highly salient to the great issue of world order. Possibly contrary to appearances, it is the United States that is the most reliably stable, indeed stabilizing, member of the superpower trio. Noisy, even all but embarrassing though the United States can be to its friends as well as to its own citizens, Americans should understand that there really is no adequate close substitute in devotion to order and the rule of law. The democratic process, notwithstanding and not ignoring its untidiness and even occasional villainies, confers a priceless competitive advantage to the United States over the sundry tyrannies that characterize the unappetizing political cultures of contemporary Russia and China. It is important to take careful note of the cultural, including political, differences, among the three superpower antagonists and to avoid the sin of 'black boxing' states as political and strategic actors.

The Perils of Tripolarity

Despite the commonality of authoritarian forms of governance, the narrow overlapping of Russian and Chinese interests is a connection of much fragility. While it is a challenge of no small importance to the United States, it also is no exaggeration to suggest that statecraft in Moscow and Beijing, no less than in Washington, is both troubled as well as tempted by the challenging possibilities that may open up.

Sino-Russian compatibility, regarded at the most elevated of levels, the grand strategic, is indeed impressive, not to say remarkable. Each is in possession of the asset most lacking and therefore most needed by the other. Whereas China is awash with people far beyond the level of strict need for relative greatness, Russia – even in its post-Soviet trimmed down character – is master of far more physical geography than it requires. Courtesy of much theft and plain



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 437 | February 6, 2019

emulation, in useful addition to domestic talent and efforts, China has succeeded in rising very rapidly in the newly three-cornered game of thrones.

There is some irony in a possible benign consequence of tripolarity, specifically a contest with three players should encourage caution, perhaps moderation, in policy and strategy because a state player will be fearful of so weakening itself even in successful competition with just one superpower foe that it would be weakened vis a vis the unengaged state. In the tripolar competition among the United States, Russia, and China, any political duel would have to be conducted in a context of relative power that was ever mindful of the likely implications regarding the third, currently unengaged, party. This is not by any means novel in the whole menu of international problems and complications, but it is a context that is wholly unfamiliar to the generations of statesmen and strategists who have worked since 1945.

We should never forget that all politics past, present, and prospectively future, is about relative influence. Whatever the form of domestic governance, the whole game of international politics always is definable as the quest for influence. Politicians scheme for it and soldiers sometimes fight to achieve it. Putin is heir to the dismal house that Stalin built, and Xi is critically dependent on a party and state structure constructed in horrific ways by Chairman Mao's murderous regime. But, whatever the differences in domestic politics, culture and material circumstance that distinguish Americans from Russian and Chinese leaders, they all strive to succeed in the common currency of relative international power. It can be helpful to our understanding of events for us to appreciate that, cultural differences granted, each super-state is led by people who understand, in distinctive ways, the value of that currency, and that each one of the three super-states is governed by relatively bold, determined leaders ready to take risks if they deem it necessary.

There can be no serious doubt about the uncertainties that will likely trouble a tripolar balance of power. Such a system of relations is thoroughly unfamiliar to us, indeed to all three superpower participants. As noted above, for example, there can be no presumption of mutual understanding. Exciting demarches in politics and strategy are not presented to international audiences with an explanatory, excusatory note. Not infrequently, we may misinterpret a foreign move that is devised primarily for the purpose of answering domestic critics, both active and anticipated.

In addition, a fundamental difficulty lies in the incompatibility of expectations among the three super-states. Each of the three – America, Russia, and now China – is more than marginally captive to its own historical narrative. The United States emerged from the wars in Europe and also in Asia in 1945 as the sole truly global power. It is perhaps remarkable that today, more than seventy years on from the strategic triumph of the mid 1940s, world politics remains organized along lines thoroughly familiar from those all but signalled so many years in the past. In large part we should recognize that the long disparaged and even dismissed lessons from geopolitics for statecraft and strategy have much lasting reality.



For example, the great Cold War ended in 1991, to the surprise of most interested parties and their dependents, but we find that today, almost three decades later, Russian behaviour is notably reminiscent of its late Nineteenth Century ancestry. Brezhnev's Soviet Union has been replaced by Putin's Russia, but what, really, has altered, if anything? A problem today is not so much the reality of Russian power, but rather is it the very plain fact of Moscow's belief in its entitlement to hegemony over Eastern Europe. This Russian belief is best characterized as being cultural, not only political and strategic, though certainly it is the latter two. We should not forget that Putin's Russia is notably captive to attitudes, ambitions, and fears that were the product of the country's dreadful historical experience, both that attributable largely to geopolitical accident and also to domestic compulsions of the oppressive kind. It would be difficult to overstate the relative importance of both physical and of mental (that is to say, imagined) geography to the prospects for World Order.

The third 'pole' in this tripolar contest, China, remains unreformed from its Communist Party blight, though it seems to be willing, if not quite reliably able, to leap to the future with a hypercapitalistic spirit. Superpower tripolarity will be troubled by the continuities of China's attempted imperial outreach, with all its dangers.

World Order

The future of any plausibly achievable condition of World Order is not looking overly bright. Appearances, however, should not be permitted to overwhelm us. It is necessary to face up to the gravest of threats to global order. Taking a severe risk of undue reductionism, I believe that there are just two global threats to our human order: climate change and nuclear weapons. These are truly collective menaces. The first of these menaces, climate change, may well prove to be more intractable than the second, and is not the subject of this essay. Suffice it for now to say that the appreciation of contemporary geopolitics behind the argument in this paper would very likely, indeed probably, be shifted notably by global climate change.

It is in no small measure ironic that this brief discussion of World Order is obliged to regard nuclear weapons as a *relatively* manageable problem set. Unlike climate change, real or fearfully anticipated, we have cohabited with nuclear weapons for just seventy-three years. These weapons have attracted the full range of views: moral, political, strategic, and technological. Happily ignorant though we remain concerning the details of nuclear warfare, we are certainly sufficiently knowledgeable to understand that its unlimited conduct must be a human catastrophe of imprudently grim dimensions. With particular regard to our theme here of World Order, it is necessary, if admittedly possibly controversial, to observe that we have responded to the reality of nuclear weapons in a rather balanced way. On the one hand we (nearly all 'we', that is), recognize that the human security narrative offers no practicable alternative to acceptance of what our science and technology unavoidably has donated, initially with the pressing incentive of an ongoing world war. Nuclear weapons are here to stay unless



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 437 | February 6, 2019

and until rendered obsolete by some new military technological development. Our entire human history has recorded, at least shown, that although individuals may make moral choices with consequences that are personally fatal, entire communities do not usually behave collectively in such an anti-strategic, which is to say non-self regarding, way. At least, they do not do so if they enjoy some useful measure of foreknowledge of adverse strategic consequences.

There is no excuse for ignorance regarding the dangers posed by large nuclear arsenals. But unquestionably they are here to stay. This is not discretionary. There is no non-nuclear option in support of World Order. An important part of the nuclear story needs to be recognition of an inevitable irony. Specifically, as we long have acknowledged the essential concept of mutual nuclear deterrence, nuclear weapons can be tamed: controlled in the cause of World Order. But, we must accept that these fearsome weapons have to be disciplined for deterrence use.

Conclusion

The relations between states are never love affairs, but they can, indeed must, be conducted with mutual respect. Each member of the superpower trio is what it is, the product of its history and geography. Conflict and some hostility in the relations among the three is only to be expected. A tolerable condition of World Order, however, can and does cope with the competitive politics of greatness. For reasons of geography, culture, and politics the United States uniquely plays critically important roles balancing would be hegemonic powers in Europe (Russia) and Asia-Pacific (China). This is a global, political, strategic, and – yes, moral duty that has fallen to the United States on behalf of all humanity. Provided the United States can remember that it needs to remain committed to order in both Europe and Asia, all should continue to be well enough.

The views in this Information Series are those of the authors and should not be construed as official U.S. Government policy, the official policy of the National Institute for Public Policy or any of its sponsors. For additional information about this publication or other publications by the National Institute Press, contact: Editor, National Institute Press, 9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750 | Fairfax, VA 22031 | (703) 293-9181 | www.nipp.org. For access to previous issues of the National Institute Press Information Series, please visit <http://www.nipp.org/national-institute-press/information-series/>.

© National Institute Press, 2019