

## WITHER THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM— AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY—AFTER UKRAINE?

by Daniel M. Ogden, J.D.

The war in Ukraine has certainly not gone the way experts had expected. The quality and readiness of Ukraine's armed forces have been severely underestimated by not only Russia and Vladimir Putin but also by the media and most Western military analysts. Also underestimated has been one of the major intangible sources of national power, that being leadership, which Volodymyr Zelenskyy has demonstrated time and again. The result appears to be essentially a military stalemate with a slight edge to Russia, but with no quick end in sight.

Besides the attention being paid to Ukraine's heroic resistance to its larger neighbor's military forces, the other primary focus has been to what extent Putin and Russian forces are guilty of alleged war crimes. While that focus is certainly valid, what has by and large not been addressed by commentators is the effect Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have on the international system as a whole. While there has been some thought and commentary regarding the effect of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on China and its relations with Russia, very little attention has been given to any systemic changes this invasion may have wrought to the international system.

### THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The international system currently in place is generally referred to as the Westphalian system. This term "Westphalian" has been used to describe the system of international relations that has existed since the Peace of Westphalia which ended the 30 Years War in 1648. While much has changed over nearly 400 years in terms of the major powers of the day, what has not changed is the concept of the "sovereign equality" of states, which is the heart of the Westphalian system. While sovereign equality means that states are not only sovereign as regards their political authority, but are also equal in terms of their legal standing with

one another, equality in no way means that states are equal in their power, influence, and survivability.

### *The International System Distribution of Power*

The nature of the Westphalian international system is often labeled as "anarchic" as there is no "supra-national" legal and political authority. This reality in part forms the basis of the international relations theory of "realism," which recognizes the anarchic nature of the international system and seeks to describe state behavior in response. Realism in its modern form was articulated by Hans Morgenthau in the mid-20th century. While Morgenthau's description of the international system advocated that the most enlightened policy for states is to operate on a basis of realism (a view also advocated over 300 years ago by France's Cardinal Richelieu), another international relations scholar, Kenneth Waltz, proposed in the 1980s a view of the international system that has come to be known as neo-realism.

The heart of Waltzian neo-realism is to view the international system in terms of "polarity," which is based upon another realist notion called the "balance of power" and which Waltz re-framed as the "distribution of power." While states such as Great Britain masterfully used the balance of power as the basis of their foreign policy for centuries, neo-realism advocates that what really matters is who the "big dogs" are, so to speak, in terms of national power. When one state is dominant, then the international system is said to be unipolar in nature, if two states are dominant, then bipolar, and if more than two states are dominant, then multipolar. States that are dominant are referred to as "hegemon." Neo-realism argues that if a state is not one of these dominant powers, then it will need to align with a hegemon in order to maximize its own power, influence, and survivability.

### *Transition from the Cold War Bipolar System*

During the Cold War, the international system was bipolar in nature with two dominant states, the United States and the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union and its client-state empire collapsed in the early 1990s, the United States stood alone as the world's dominant state, thereby ushering in a period of a unipolar world. While international relations scholars debate whether a unipolar world is inherently more stable than a bipolar or multipolar world, the fact is that in the last 20 years or so the U.S. has enjoyed a hegemony that has been beneficial to its national interests (despite what detractors of the United States' position as the world's lone superpower, such as the late Madeline Albright, have said about the dangers of such a world).

In recent years, however, the People's Republic of China has begun to challenge the U.S. as the world's sole hegemon. The key event that China has used in its favor to initiate this challenge has been China's membership in the World Trade Organization that began in late 2001. This increased China's economic power, which in turn strengthened its military capabilities—which have also been strengthened by its frequent intellectual property thefts and its far-reaching military and industrial espionage—and has led to China's stated policy of civil-military fusion. As a result, the international system has arguably been rapidly moving away from a unipolar towards a bipolar world where China has replaced the USSR as the world's second dominant power. Whether this transition has yet or will occur is debatable, but what is not debatable is that momentum in the last 20 years has been building towards this change.

### *Effects of Ukraine War on International Polarity*

This is where Russia comes into the picture. One of Putin's major goals, if not his primary goal, has been to restore Russia to its former status during the time of the USSR as one of the world's hegemon. If successful and if China's current military and economic trend continues, the international system therefore would not be a bipolar system but rather a multipolar system for the first time since pre-World War I. The international system in the 19th century was a multipolar world in which power was distributed between five European powers. While this system eventually broke down, a multipolar international system is advocated by many international observers to be the most stable. That stability, however, can be threatened when, for example, a three-hegemon multipolar world evolves into a hybrid bipolar world in which two hegemon enter into an explicit alliance, which then threatens the remaining hegemon.

That situation was a potential reality prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as illustrated by Russia's and China's joint statement during the 2022 Olympics that their alliance was "infinite" in nature. While that statement may indeed be mere hyperbole, a revitalized Russia along with an increasingly more powerful China would pose an existential threat to the United States and its national interests, not to mention other democratic countries.

There is a second factor here also at play. The European Union has been trending more and more away from its alliance with the U.S., thereby declaring its status as an independent power and thus potentially creating a fourth hegemon. While Donald Trump has inaccurately been blamed for this trend, the EU in fact has sought to assert itself as a world power for years and had begun, for example, to engage in closer economic relations with China long before Trump entered the White House. This trend, if continued, would also weaken the U.S. *vis-a-vis* China and Russia as the EU's cozying up to China, as well as to Russia in regard to the EU's energy supplies, would result in the relative power of the U.S. being diminished.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to the contrary, has very possibly changed the calculus of power in the international system in at least two ways. First, Russia has expended significant military resources to fight Ukraine with little to show for it at present. And second, the placing of economic sanctions by the West on Russia has undoubtedly damaged Russia's economic position. While economic sanctions arguably are often ineffective or even counter-productive, there can be no debate that Russia, at least in the short term, has been damaged by these sanctions. Additionally, and related to these sanctions, the EU has done an about face in terms of its reliance of Russia for energy supplies, thus disrupting Russia's main source of hard currency, and NATO itself has been spurred to strengthen its alliance with many members now willing to spend the required 2 percent of their GDP on defense. The effect of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, therefore, has been to move EU away from Russia in economic terms, thus strengthening the U.S. not only as a potential supplier of energy resources to Europe—thereby replacing Russia—but also resulting in more European countries desiring to join NATO, thereby diminishing Russia's military position and strengthening the U.S. in turn.

### *Ukraine War & the Chinese-Russian Alliance*

The true wildcard is the potential effect that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had on Russia's relationship and alliance with China. In spite of

China's steadfast denials that anything has changed in regard to its relations with Russia, what matters in regard to the nature of the polarity of the international system is not so much Xi Jinping's intentions in regard to Russia but what Russia can now offer to China in terms of an alliance. If a weakened Russia cannot provide to a rising China much in terms of increasing China's relative power versus the United States, not to mention Russia being unable to become a dominant state in its own right, then a transition from a unipolar to a bipolar international system might end at that point without resulting in a multipolar world or a hybrid bipolar world where the two hegemons of Russia and China potentially overwhelm the U.S. by threatening its national interests on several fronts. The U.S. therefore can counter this potentiality by continuing to provide assistance to Ukraine which will not only help to weaken Russia but will also weaken the effects of a Chinese-Russian alliance.

## **U.S. FOREIGN POLICY APPROACHES IN RESPONSE**

The nature of the international system with its realities of hegemons and distributions of power has led many in the U.S. to call for a revision of the basis for U.S. foreign policy. In particular, two vastly different philosophies underlying these revisions have been promoted. One is for the U.S. to basically disengage from the international system by putting on blinders and just focus on internal U.S. issues. This philosophy, known as "isolationism," advocates that the U.S. isolate itself from the power struggles inherent in the international system.

### *Isolationism*

The philosophy of isolationism is based principally upon a misunderstanding and false characterization of the foreign policy advice of George Washington regarding "entangling alliances." When Washington made those remarks, Europe was in the midst of perpetual conflicts and struggles between colonial powers. The U.S. was a newly independent state who was vulnerable from being dominated by a permanent alliance with one or more European states. Washington's advice, therefore, was tactical rather than being a statement of ethics or an argument for a permanent policy. In fact, Washington recognized the strategic value of alliances made with France and Spain during the Revolutionary War without which the United States would not have survived. Washington's advice, not surprisingly, was actually very similar to the foreign policy of Great Britain during that time which sought not to engage in permanent alliances, but rather to maintain the flexibility to engage in a policy of balancing the power of continental European states.

Historically, the foolishness of isolationism as a basis for U.S. foreign policy is best illustrated in the years prior to World War II. Similar to that period, if the U.S. today were to adopt a policy of isolationism, it would lose the ability to have any control or influence over any future direction that the international system takes.

### *Globalism*

A completely opposite perspective that has been advocated as a basis for U.S. foreign policy is best illustrated by the underlying philosophy of the foreign policy of Barack Obama. This philosophy believes that only by increasing the power of international institutions at the expense of the power of states, and most critically changing the nature of such institutions from "international" to "supranational," can the international system reach stability and peace. This result would transform the international system into a global system where the sovereignty of nation-states is greatly reduced or ultimately eliminated by a structure of global governance, thereby replacing nation-states with a global or world government in the form of a confederation or federation of nations. This philosophy is best described as "globalism" and the frequently made statement "I am a citizen of the world" is illustrative of the sentiments of globalists who believe that the nation-state system of governance to be archaic and the Westphalian international system outdated, unjust, inequitable, or whatever term one wishes to use.

While such a globalist system was advocated by Immanuel Kant over 250 years ago and has been proposed by many others throughout history as the solution to conflict between nations, such a system would not only rob individuals of their God-given rights such as those articulated in the U.S. Declaration of Independence but also is inherently unworkable due to the nature of mankind. The oft quoted phrase "if men were angels" describes what it would take for such a system to work. The fact that men are not angels in and of itself provides an inescapable conclusion that such a system would ultimately result in tyranny at the highest level. One merely need remember Lord Acton's remark that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely to realize that a world government would lead to a nightmarish existence. An additional fact mitigating against the wisdom of the establishment of a globalist government is that all totalitarian movements of the 20th century, be they national socialism or communism in its various forms, have advocated for a world government under the control of that particular ideology. A globalist governmental system, rather than solving the issues of stability and conflict in the international system,



would do just the opposite in that it could permit a unipolar world hegemon of a totalitarian nature to become the sole controlling governmental force of the world, thereby leading to the dystopia so often depicted in futuristic novels and Hollywood movies.

Ironically, or perhaps not so, one of the major advocates for such a globalist system is Xi Jinping. Xi frequently talks and writes about changing and rewriting the “rules” of the current international system thereby moving away from the Westphalian system as he views that system as founded on Western principles which he explicitly rejects. While Xi pays lip service to an international system where no single state is able to be dominant, China historically has seen itself as the “Middle Kingdom” in which it has a “mandate of heaven” and where the ruler of China is deemed to be the “Son of Heaven.” While Xi Jinping for certain does not see himself as a son of a god, he considers history, as do all Marxists, to provide a mandate for the rule of whatever governmental structure a Marxist considers to be just. When combined with a strong dose of Chinese nationalism, Xi Jinping’s melding of Marxist thought with such nationalism fits perfectly with Mao’s vision of China obtaining its rightful and historic role of ruling the world if not literally then at least in terms of being the world’s sole hegemon and thereby imposing its values and its political, social and economic system on the rest of the world.

### *Strategic Engagement*

In response then to the effect on the international system of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China’s rising power, and the Chinese-Russian alliance, what should the basis of U.S. foreign policy be going forward? Quite simply, the U.S. should have a policy of “strategic engagement.” While this certainly is not a novel proposition, the importance of such a policy nevertheless cannot be overstated as the realities of the nature of the international system leaves the United States no choice but to engage with that system by pursuing its strategic national interests. A policy of strategic engagement does not mean that the U.S. should be involved in every single international conflict, even when such conflicts contain issues of U.S. concern. Rather, a foreign policy of strategic engagement demands that the U.S. assess whether an international conflict is vital to the U.S. strategic position and then exercise a Burkean prudence in determining the degree of such an engagement.

The single most important strategic national interest the U.S. has at present is to avert the threat to its international position resulting from an alliance of China and Russia. The U.S. cannot counter this threat by merely putting its head in

the sand and withdrawing from the world, nor will the creation of supranational institutions and global governance remove this threat. The international system which presently exists requires the U.S. to strategically engage the world in such a way that the American experiment in liberty remains secure as these God-given liberties that Americans enjoy will not be preserved in other way. In the final analysis, this is the lens by which Russia’s invasion of Ukraine must be viewed.

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