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If This Is a New Cold War, Who's the Enemy Supposed to Be?

Jesse Walker

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It's disorienting to see Edward Snowden charged with espionage. Legal definitions aside, people generally conceive of spies as somebody's *agents*, extracting information for a firm or a foreign country. But if the NSA whistleblower was a spy, he was spying for the public. Not exactly your standard espionage plot.

That may be one reason so many people have started reheating their Cold War metaphors, a trend my colleague Nick Gillespie noted in *The Daily Beast* this morning. If we can rewrite the Snowden story in those old Robert Ludlum terms, it's easier to organize the news into a familiar narrative.

Hence articles like David Francis' bizarre piece on Snowden in the *Fiscal Times*, which strives mightily not just to reimagine the modern multipolar world as a conflict between two forces but to sort those forces into simple categories of bad guys and good. Declaring that "with the defeat of al Qaeda in Afghanistan, the threat of a spectacular terror attack conducted by a large, organized group are diminishing," Francis claims that

countries are lining up behind either the United States or China based on broad governing philosophies. Authoritarian powers like Pakistan have aligned with the Chinese and Russians. The United States maintains relationships with democracies like the United Kingdom and Germany, while courting emerging democracies like India, a nuclear power that happens to be right next to Pakistan, also a nuclear power.

At the same time, smaller countries are pledging loyalty based on political ideology and perceived benefit. Iran, North Korea and Syria have strong relationships with Russia and China, as they enable these countries to continue authoritarian rule. The same can be said of South American countries with authoritarian tendencies like Venezuela and Ecuador.

More democratic countries like South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Brazil and Argentina have joined the American alliance. Former Soviet republics like Georgia and Kazakhstan struggle to break free of Moscow and align themselves with the west.

You'd never suspect from reading this that the U.S. pours aid into, say, the authoritarian Gulf states (and did not cease to pour it when it looked like a democratic movement might topple the dictatorship in Bahrain). For that matter, you wouldn't know that Pakistan gets substantial sums from Washington as well as Beijing. Much as it may pain some pundits to admit it, global geopolitics is not an existential struggle between good and evil. It isn't even a bipolar struggle between the U.S. and China. The one glimmer of truth in Francis' account is the fact that China, Russia, and Ecuador all are "quiet rivals or are downright hostile toward the United States." Not because they're part of a power bloc, and not because Snowden supports their policies, but because that's who's most likely to be welcoming when you're a political refugee trying to avoid an American jail cell.

But suppose we reach for a different Cold War–flavored metaphor, one that has mutated a bit since it was first deployed. A decade ago, as a global movement coalesced to oppose the drive toward war with Iraq, it briefly became fashionable to describe an emerging "second superpower" that wasn't a nation-state at all. The most influential expression of this idea was probably James F. Moore's 2003 article "The Second Superpower Rears Its Beautiful Head":

The collective power of texting, blogging, instant messaging, and email across millions of actors cannot be overestimated. Like a mind constituted of millions of internetworked neurons, the social movement is capable of astonishingly rapid and sometimes subtle community consciousness and action.

Thus the new superpower demonstrates a new form of "emergent democracy" that differs from the participative democracy of the US government. Where political participation in the United States is exercised mainly through rare exercises of voting, participation in the second superpower movement occurs continuously through participation in a variety of web-enabled initiatives. And where deliberation in the first superpower is done primarily by a few elected or appointed officials, deliberation in the second superpower is done by each individual—making sense of events, communicating with others, and deciding whether and how to join in community actions. Finally, where participation in democracy in the first superpower feels remote to most citizens, the emergent democracy of the second superpower is alive with touching and being

touched by each other, as the community works to create wisdom and to take action.

How does the second superpower take action? Not from the top, but from the bottom. That is, it is the strength of the US government that it can centrally collect taxes, and then spend, for example, \$1.2 billion on 1,200 cruise missiles in the first day of the war against Iraq. By contrast, it is the strength of the second superpower that it could mobilize hundreds of small groups of activists to shut down city centers across the United States on that same first day of the war. And that millions of citizens worldwide would take to their streets to rally. The symbol of the first superpower is the eagle—an awesome predator that rules from the skies, preying on mice and small animals. Perhaps the best symbol for the second superpower would be a community of ants. Ants rule from below. And while I may be awed seeing eagles in flight, when ants invade my kitchen they command my attention.

The essay was sometimes frustrating, since Moore had a habit of confusing his ant-power model with the policies he'd like to see passed. He was excessively excited, for example, about various NGO-driven treaties that would not, if enacted, be any less top-down than the forces he was criticizing. (His affection for international institutions was so strong that he even wrote this: "Perhaps too often we attack institutions like the World Bank that might, under the right conditions, actually become partners with us in dealing with the first superpower.") And Moore's examples of the second superpower in action included MoveOn.org, a group devoted to putting its preferred politicians in charge of Superpower #1.

But that's just Moore's politics getting in the way of his analysis. Beneath that fog you still have this inspiring idea of a superpower that isn't a conventional world power at all, one based around individual action and bottom-up collaboration: a place tailor-made for freelance leakers and the groups and technologies that make it easier to spread their information. If you insist on seeing Snowden as a spy, then *this* is the superpower he's spying for. Not a superpower opposed to America, but one that millions of Americans participate in. More Americans, perhaps, than there are in the U.S. government.

The trouble with a deterritorialized second superpower—this is where the metaphor kind of falls apart—is that it can't grant anyone asylum. That's why Snowden is trying to seek refuge in Ecuador instead of the Autonomous WikiLeaks Favela or the Pirate Party Seastead. Meanwhile, America's authoritarians are already starting to combine the Cold War story with a darker version of the second-superpower idea, aiming not to empower the ants but to stomp on them. Here's Stuart Stevens, chief strategist for the Mitt Romney presidential campaign, with a revolting essay in *The Daily Beast*:

Snowden's U.S. passport has been rescinded and now he is, in effect, fleeing the U.S. authorities on a WikiLeaks passport. The organization is acting like a digital state with enemies and allies. Fine. Let's treat it accordingly and address the threat WikiLeaks presents not as a simple criminal act by random individuals but as the organized effort of a virtual state. As such, we should employ the full set of tools—ranging from diplomacy and world opinion to espionage and military force—we use when dealing with any other state....

WikiLeaks has made clear its interest in taking on the United States. Let's do now what we failed

to with al Qaeda in the decade before 9/11: take it at its word, respect its capabilities and stated intent, and respond with our own not-so-modest capabilities to defend the United States.

Stevens adds that "This is not a moment to get misty-eyed and muddle-headed about freedom of the press or right to know." I would reply that it's not a moment to get misty-eyed and muddle-headed about the Cold War and "digital states." Maybe that's where the real faultline lies: not between international power blocs, but between two visions here at home.