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A real counterweight to US power is a global necessity

Seumas Milne

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Where is the end of history now? Across three continents, conflicts are multiplying. An arc of war, foreign intervention and state breakdown stretches from Afghanistan to north Africa.

In Iraq and Syria, the so-called Islamic State – mutant offspring of the war on terror – is now the target of renewed US-led intervention. In Ukraine, thousands have died in the proxy fighting between Russian-backed rebels and the western-sponsored Kiev government. And in the far east, tensions between China, Japan and other US allies are growing.

British troops finally finally ended combat operations in Afghanistan on Sunday after 13 years of disastrous occupation. The bizarre claim, despite al-Qaida's global spread, is that the mission was "pretty successful" — in a country where tens of thousands have been killed, the Taliban control vast areas, violence against women has escalated and elections are a fig leaf of fraud and intimidation.

The Afghan invasion launched what would become the west's war without end, encompassing the catastrophe of Iraq, drone wars from Pakistan to Somalia, covert support for jihadi rebels in

Syria and “humanitarian” intervention in Libya that has left behind a failed state in the grip of civil war.

The Middle East is now in an unparalleled and unprecedented crisis. More than any other single factor, that is the product of continual US and western intervention and support for dictatorships, both before and after the “Arab spring”, unconstrained by any system of international power or law.

But if the Middle Eastern maelstrom is the fruit of a US-dominated new world order, Ukraine is a result of the challenge to the unipolar world that grew out of the failure of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. It was the attempt to draw divided Ukraine into the western camp by EU and US hawks after years of eastward Nato expansion that triggered the crisis, Russia’s absorption of Crimea and the uprising in the Russian-speaking Donbass region of the east.

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Eight months on, elections on both sides look likely to deepen the division of the country. Routinely dismissed as Kremlin propaganda, the reality is the US and EU backed the violent overthrow of an elected if corrupt government and are now supporting a military campaign that includes far-right militias accused of war crimes — while Russia is subject to sweeping US and EU sanctions.

Last week at the Valdai discussion club near Sochi, Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, launched his fiercest denunciation yet of this US role in the world – perhaps not surprisingly after Barack Obama had bracketed Russia with Ebola and Isis as America’s top three global threats. After the cold war, Putin declared, the US had tried to dominate the world through “unilateral diktat” and “illegal intervention”, disregarding international law and institutions if they got in the way. The result had been conflict, insecurity and the rise of groups such as Isis, as the US and its allies were “constantly fighting the consequences of their own policies”.

None of which is very controversial across most of the world. During a Valdai club session I chaired, Putin told foreign journalists and academics that the unipolar world had been a “means of justifying dictatorship over people and countries” – but the emerging multipolar world was likely to be still more unstable. The only answer – and this was clearly intended as an opening to the west – was to rebuild international institutions, based on mutual respect and co-operation. The choice was new rules – or no rules, which would lead to “global anarchy”.

When I asked Putin whether Russia’s actions in Ukraine had been a response to, and an example of, a “no-rules order”, Putin denied it, insisting that the Kosovo precedent meant Crimea had every right to self-determination. But by conceding that Russian troops had intervened in Crimea “to block Ukrainian units”, he effectively admitted crossing the line of legality – even if not remotely on the scale of the illegal invasions, bombing campaigns and covert interventions by the US and its allies over the past decade and a half.

But there is little chance of the western camp responding to Putin’s call for a new system of global rules. In fact, the US showed little respect for rules during the cold war either, intervening

relentlessly wherever it could. But it did have respect for power. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, that restraint disappeared. It was only the failure of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – and Russia’s subsequent challenge to western expansion and intervention in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine – that provided some check to unbridled US power.

Along with the rise of China, it has also created some space for other parts of the world to carve out their political independence, notably in Latin America. Putin’s oligarchic nationalism may not have much global appeal, but Russia’s role as a counterweight to western supremacism certainly does. Which is why much of the world has a different view of events in Ukraine from the western orthodoxy – and why China, India, Brazil and South Africa all abstained from the condemnation of Russia over Crimea at the UN earlier this year.

But Moscow’s check on US military might is limited. Its economy is over-dependent on oil and gas, under-invested and now subject to disabling sanctions. Only China offers the eventual prospect of a global restraint on western unilateral power and that is still some way off. As Putin is said to have told the US vice-president, Joe Biden, Russia may not be strong enough to compete for global leadership, but could yet decide who that leader might be.

Even Obama still regularly insists that the US is the “indispensable nation”. And it seems almost certain that whoever takes over from Obama will be significantly more hawkish and interventionist. The US elite remains committed to global domination and whatever can be preserved of the post-1991 new world order.

Despite the benefits of the emerging multipolar world, the danger of conflict, including large-scale wars, looks likely to grow. The public pressure that brought western troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan is going to have to get far stronger in the years to come – if that threat is not to engulf us all.