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American Power at the Crossroads

By Tom Engelhardt
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Last week in Afghanistan, the Taliban, once almost lacking a presence in the northern part of the country, attacked Kunduz, a northern provincial capital and held parts of it for days (as they had in 2015). At the moment, that movement also has two southern capitals under siege, Tarin Kot in Helmand Province and Lashkar Gah in Uruzgan Province, and now seems to control more territory and population than at any time since the U.S. invasion of 2001-2002. Mind you, from an American perspective, we're talking about the war that time forgot. Amid the hurricane of words in Election 2016, neither presidential candidate nor their vice presidential surrogates has thought it worth the bother to pay any real attention to the Afghan War, though it is the longest in our history. It's as if, 15 years later, it isn't even happening, as if American troops hadn't once again been ordered into combat situations and the U.S. Air Force wasn't once again flying increased missions there.

Of course, it wasn't supposed to be this way, not for the planet's "sole superpower," its "hyperpower," its last remaining "sheriff" bestriding the globe with military bases in close to 80 countries, its Special Operations forces in almost 150 nations annually, and its Navy's 10 aircraft carrier battle groups patrolling the seas. On paper, it's been a hell of a new century for the United States. Only reality, it seems, has begged to differ.

As *TomDispatch* regular Dilip Hiro points out today, if you've noticed the growing assertiveness of China and Russia (and perhaps, one of these days, India will become more assertive, too), you'll know that we're on an increasingly multipolar planet. In reality, I suspect it's always been a significantly more multipolar place than anyone in Washington cared to imagine. In a sense, our world is not only becoming more multipolar but also more helter-skelter, a place filled with low-level insurgencies and terror outfits that simply can't be crushed, amid failing and collapsing states and vast refugee flows, on a globe that is ever more subject to the overheated, rampaging pressures of nature. It's not exactly the picture of a tidy imperial planet nor one that Washington had ever imagined possible. ~ *Tom*

A Snapshot of a Multipolar World in Action
By Dilip Hiro

In the strangest election year in recent American history – one in which the Libertarian Party's Gary Johnson couldn't even conjure up the name of a foreign leader he "admired" while Donald Trump remained intent on building his "fat, beautiful wall" and "taking" Iraq oil – the world may be out of focus for many Americans right now. So a little introduction to the planet we actually inhabit is in order. Welcome to a multipolar world. One fact stands out: Earth is no longer the property of the globe's "sole superpower."

If you want proof, you can start by checking out Moscow's recent role in reshaping the civil war in Syria and frustrating Washington's agenda to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. And that's just one of a number of developments that highlight America's diminishing power globally in both the military and the diplomatic arenas. On a peaceable note, consider the way China has successfully launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as a rival to the World Bank, not to speak of its implementation of a plan to link numerous countries in Asia and Europe to China in a vast multinational transportation and pipeline network it grandly calls the One Belt and One Road system, or the New Silk Road project. In such developments, one can see ways in which the previously overwhelming economic power of the U.S. is gradually being challenged and curtailed internationally.

Moscow Calling the Shots in Syria

The Moscow-Washington agreement of September 10th on Syria, reached after 10 months of hard bargaining and now in shambles after another broken truce, had one crucial if little noted aspect. For the first time since the Soviet Union imploded, Russia managed to put itself on the same diplomatic footing as the U.S. As Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov commented, "This is not the end of the road… just the beginning of our new relations" with Washington. Even though those relations are now in a state of suspension and exacerbation, it's indisputable that the Kremlin's limited military intervention in Syria was tailored to achieve a multiplier effect, yielding returns both in that war-ravaged, devastated land and in international diplomacy.

In August 2015, by all accounts, President Assad was on the ropes and the morale of his dwindling army at rock bottom. Even the backing of Iran and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah had proven insufficient to reverse his faltering hold on power.

To save his regime from collapse, the Kremlin's military planners decided to fill the gaping hole left by Syria's collapsing air force, shore up its air defenses, and boost its depleted arsenal of tanks and armored vehicles. For this, they turned one of Russia's last footholds abroad, an airbase near the Mediterranean port of Latakia, into a forward operating base, and shipped to it warplanes, attack helicopters, tanks, artillery, and armored personnel carriers. Russia also deployed its most advanced S-400 surface-to-air missiles there.

The number of Russian military personnel dispatched was estimated at 4,000 to 5,000. Although none of them were ground troops, this was an unprecedented step in recent Russian history. The last time the Kremlin had deployed significant forces outside its territory – in December 1979 in Afghanistan – proved an ill-judged venture, ending a decade later in their withdrawal, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

"An attempt by Russia and Iran to prop up Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire, and it won't work," said President Barack Obama at a White House press conference soon after the Russian military intervention. He should have been an expert on the subject since a U.S.-led coalition had been bombing targets in Syrian territory controlled by the terrorist Islamic State (ISIS) since September 2014. Nonetheless, the Pentagon soon signed a memorandum of understanding with the Kremlin over safety procedures for their aircraft, now sharing Syrian air space, and established a ground communications link for any problems that should arise.

During the next six months in a sustained air campaign, Russian warplanes carried out 9,000 sorties, claiming to have destroyed 209 oil production and transfer facilities (supposedly controlled by ISIS), and enabled the Syrian army to retake 400 settlements spread over 3,860 square miles. In the process, the Russians lost just five men. As the prospect of Russia playing an ongoing critical role in Syria grew, the mood in the White House started to change. In mid-March 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry met Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin. The implication, even if through gritted teeth, was that the U.S. recognized the legitimacy of the Russian position in Syria, and that closer coordination between the two leading players was needed to crush ISIS.

A year after the Russian campaign was launched, most major Syrian cities were back in government hands (even if often in rubble), and rebel-held eastern Aleppo was under attack. The morale of the Assad regime had improved, even if the overall size of its army had diminished. It was no longer in danger of being overthrown and its hand was strengthened at any future negotiating table.

No less important to the Russians, just reemerging on the Middle Eastern stage, all the anti-Assad foreign players in Syria had come to recognize the pivotal position that the Kremlin had acquired in that war-torn land where a five-and-a-half-year civil conflict had resulted in an upper estimate of nearly 500,000 deaths, and the bombing of hospitals had become commonplace. On the first anniversary of the Russian campaign, Putin dispatched more planes to Syria, which made getting into a quagmire a possibility. But there can be no question that, in the interim, Putin's strategy had served Russia's geopolitical goals well.

Putin Sought Out by the Anti-Assad Arabs

Between October 2015 and August 2016, top officials from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Turkey all held talks with Putin at different venues. The first to do so, that October, was the Saudi defense minister, Prince Muhammad, a son of Saudi King Salman. They met at the Russian president's dacha in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. Saudi Arabia had already funded the purchase of CIA-procured TOW anti-tank missiles, which had largely powered a rebel offensive against Assad in the summer of 2015. Now, the two agreed that they shared the common goal of preventing "a terrorist caliphate [ISIS] from getting the upper hand." When Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir mentioned his concern about the rebel groups the Russians were targeting, Putin expressed readiness to share intelligence, which meant future cooperation between their militaries and security services.

Later that day, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the deputy supreme commander ofthearmed forces of the United Arab Emirates, called on Putin. "Ican say that Russia plays avery serious role inMiddle Eastern affairs," he stated afterwards, adding, "There is no doubt that we have aprivileged relationship."

The ruler of Qatar, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, went a step further after meeting Putin at the Kremlin in January 2016. "Russia," he declared, "plays a main role when it comes to stability in the world." Along with Jordan, Qatar had been providing the CIA with bases for training and arming anti-Assad insurgents. A month later, the next Gulf chief to call on Putin in Sochi would be King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain, which has hosted the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet since 1971. He presented a "victory sword" of Damascene steel to the Russian leader. After their talks, Foreign Minister Lavrov reported that the two countries had agreed to boost economic and military ties.

In August, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan traveled to St. Petersburg to meet "my dear friend" Putin. Their relations had fallen to a low point when the Turks shot down a Russian warplane over northern Syria. Unlike Western leaders, however, Putin had personally called Erdogan to congratulate him on aborting an attempted military coup in July. "We are always categorically opposed to any attempts at anti-constitutional activity," he explained. After three hours of talks, they agreed to mend their strained economic relations and, in a striking reversal, Erdogan suddenly stopped calling on Assad to step down.

In sum, thanks to his limited military intervention in Syria, Putin had acquired enhanced leverage in decisions affecting the future of the Middle East, which helped divert international attention from Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine. To Putin's satisfaction, he had succeeded in offering an on-the-ground rebuttal to Obama's claim, made after Moscow's seizure of Crimea, that "Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors, not out of strength but out of weakness."

As an added bonus, Putin had helped solidify his own popularity at home, which had spiked to a record 89% approval rating in the wake of events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine at a time when U.S. and European sanctions, combined with low oil prices, had led to a recession that would shrink the Russian economy by 3.7% in 2015. It was a striking demonstration that, in domestic

politics, popular perception about a strong leader trumps – if you'll excuse the word – economic realities. This year the Russian economy is expected to shrink by perhaps another 1% and yet in recent parliamentary elections, the Putin-backed United Russia party won 54% of the vote, and 343 of 450 seats.

Chinese and Russian Geopolitical Interests Converge

As a result, in part, of Western sanctions, Russia has also been tightening its economic ties with China. In June 2016, Putin made his fourth trip to Beijing since March 2013 when Xi Jinping became the Chinese president. The two leaders stressed their shared outlook mirroring their countries' converging trade, investment, and geopolitical interests.

"President Putin and I equally agree," Xi said, "that when faced with international circumstances that are increasingly complex and changing, we must persist even harder in maintaining the spirit of the 2001 Sino-Russian strategic partnership and cooperation." Summing up relations between the two neighbors, Putin offered this assessment: "Russia and China stick to points of view which are very close to each other or are almost the same in the international arena." As co-founders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 1996, the two countries regard themselves as Eurasian powers.

During his visit to Beijing last June, Putin cited 58 deals worth $50 billion that were then being discussed by the two governments. Russia was also preparing to issue yuan-denominated sovereign bonds to raise $1 billion and discussing plans to link China's national electronic payment network to its own credit card system. The two neighbors were already partners in a $400 billion deal in which the Russian energy company Gazprom is expected to supply China with natural gas for the next 30 years.

As an example of the Sino-Russian geopolitical convergence in action, Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, head of China's Office for International Military Cooperation, recently visited the Syrian capital, Damascus. He met with Syrian Defense Minister Fahd Jassem al-Freij and held talks with the Russian general coordinating military assistance to that country. Guan and al-Freij agreed to expand Chinese training and humanitarian aid in order to counter religious extremism.

During Putin's June visit, Xi called for closer cooperation between their news agencies so that both countries could "together increase the influence" of their media on world public opinion. Each has actually already made significant forays into the global information stream. In China, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television started its "going out" project in 2001 through China Central Television. By 2009, its foreign language section was broadcasting programs globally via satellite and cable in Arabic, English, French, Russian, and Spanish.

In 2006, Putin set up RT as a brand of TV-Novosti, an autonomous non-profit organization financed by the Russian news agency, RIA Novosti, with a budget of $30 million, and gave it a mandate to present the Russian point of view on international events. Since then, RT International has been offering round-the-clock news bulletins, documentaries, talk shows, debates, sports news, and cultural programs in 12 languages, including English, Arabic, Spanish,

Hindi, and Turkish. RT America and RT UK have been airing locally based content since 2010 and 2014 respectively.

With an annual budget of $300 million in 2013-2014, RT still lagged behind the BBC World Service Group, with its $367 million budget and news in 36 languages. During a visit to RT's state-of-the-art studios in Moscow in 2013, Putin urged its employees to "break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on global information streams."

China's Global Power Projection

In 2010, President Obama launched his "pivot to Asia" strategy to contain China's rising power. In reply, within six months of becoming president, Xi Jinping unveiled a blueprint for his country's ambitious One Belt and One Road project. It was aimed at nothing less than reordering the geostrategic configuration of international politics, while promoting the economic reconstruction of Eurasia. Domestically, it was meant to balance China's over-reliance on its coastal areas by developing its western hinterlands. It was also to link China, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia to Europe by a web of railways and energy pipelines. In February 2015, the first cargo train successfully completed a 16,156-mile round trip from the eastern Chinese city of Yiwu to Madrid, Spain, and back – a striking sign of changing times.

In 2014, to implement its New Silk Road project, Beijing established the Silk Road Fund and capitalized it at $40 billion. Its aim was to foster increased investment in countries along the project's various routes. Given China's foreign reserves of $3.3 trillion in 2015 – up from $1.9 trillion in 2008 – the amount involved was modest and yet it looks to prove crucial to China's futuristic planning.

In January 2015, the Chinese government also established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in Beijing. Two months later, ignoring Washington's urgings, Great Britain became the first major Western nation to sign on as a founding member. France, Germany, and Italy immediately followed its lead. None of them could afford to ignore China's robust economic expansion, which, among other things, has turned that country into the globe's largest trading nation. With $3.87 trillion worth of imports and exports in 2012, it overtook the U.S. ($3.82 trillion), displacing it from a position it had held for 60 years.

China is now the number one trading partner for 29 countries, including some members of the 10-strong Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This may explain why ASEAN failed to agree to unanimously back the Philippines, a member, when the Arbitral Tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled in July in its favor and against China's claims to rights in the South China Sea. Soon after, China announced the holding of a 10-day-long joint Sino-Russian naval exercise in those waters.

Reflecting its expanding gross domestic product (GDP), China's military expenditures have also been on the rise. According to the Pentagon's annual report on the Chinese armed forces, Beijing's defense budget has risen 9.8% annually since 2006, reaching $180 billion in 2015, or 1.7% of its GDP. By contrast, the Pentagon's 2015 budget, $585 billion, was 3.2% of U.S. GDP.

Of the four branches of its military, the Chinese government is, for obvious reasons, especially focused on expanding and improving its naval capacity.

A study of its naval doctrine shows that it is following the classic pattern set by the United States, Germany, and Japan in the late nineteenth century in their quest to become global powers. First comes a focus on coastal defense of the homeland; second, establishing the security of its territorial waters and shipping; and third, the protection of key sea-lanes it uses for its commercial interests. For Beijing, safeguarding the sea-lanes used to bring Persian Gulf oil to the ports of southern China is crucial.

The ultimate aim and fourth stage of this process for an aspiring world power, of course, is power projection to distant lands. At present, having reached the third stage in this process, China is laying the foundation for its final goal with a Maritime Silk Road project, which involves building up ports in Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

The medium-term aim of China's navy is to curtail the monopoly that the U.S. has enjoyed in the Pacific. It is rapidly building up its fleet of submarines for this purpose. Meanwhile, as a sign of things to come, China acquired a 10-year lease on a 90-acre site in Djbouti in the Horn of Africa to build its first foreign military outpost. In stark contrast, according to the Pentagon's latest Base Structure Report, the U.S. has bases in 74 countries. The respective figures for France and Britain are 10 and seven. Obviously, China has a long way to go to catch up.

The Realistic Aims of China and Russia

At the moment, Chinese leaders do not seem to imagine their country openly challenging the United States for world leadership for, minimally, decades to come. Ten years ago, the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the country's most prestigious think tank, came up with the concept of "comprehensive national power" as a single, carefully calculated number on a scale of 100. In 2015, the respective figures for America, China and Russia were 91.68, 33.92, and 30.48.

At 35.12, Japan was number two on the list. At 12.97, India was number 10, although that has not deterred its prime minister, Narendra Modi, from declaring that his country has entered "the age of aspiration," and insisting that the latter part of the twenty-first century will belong to India. To any realist, Modi's claim lies in the realm of fantasy, but it is a reminder of just how multipolar the coming decades could turn out to be. (When it comes to distant power projection, India has done no better than to start building a radar network in Mauritius, the Seychelles, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean to keep tabs on Chinese merchant shipping and warships.)

The global scenario that the down-to-earth presidents of China and Russia seem to have in mind resembles the sort of balance of power that existed in Europe for a century after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. In the wake of that fateful year, the monarchs of Britain, Austria, Russia, and Prussia resolved that no single European country should ever become as powerful as France had been under Napoleon. The resulting Concert of Europe then held from 1815 until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

China and Russia are now trying to ensure that Washington no longer exercises unrestrained power globally, as it did between 1992 and summer of 2008. In early August 2008, overwhelmed by the mounting challenges of its war in Afghanistan, and its military occupation of Iraq, the Bush administration limited itself to verbal condemnations of Russia's military action to reverse gains made by the pro-western president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, in an unprovoked attack on the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

Think of that episode as a little-noticed marker of the end of a unipolar planet in which American power went mostly unchecked. If that is so, then welcome to the ninth year of a multipolar world.