

Turning Back the Clock in Great Power Politics

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, JUL 19 2012

If one takes the time to look through the international relations literature between 1992 and say 2008, you will find plenty of scholars attacking realists for their supposed inability to predict the end of the Cold War, the changing nature of politics from 'international' to 'global', the emergence of the human security doctrine, the rise of critical theory, and a vast expansion of the field's boundaries from where they stood up until the fall of the Soviet Union. The economic and political collapse of the Soviet regime, which in turn led to its military downfall, ushered in the unipolar moment of international relations and meant that traditional approaches to understanding the world immediately became antiquated...or at least this is what some would have us believe.

To start, realists did not fail to predict anything when it came to the Soviet Union's collapse. The rationality assumption is contingent upon states calculating cost-benefit analyses in their decision-making in an effort to survive. As the history of the state system has shown, there is no such thing as "perfect rationality", in that, while states may be trying to maximize benefits with minimal costs, they sometimes can get that calculation wrong because of imperfect information or at times outright stupidity (think here of the US and UK in 2003). From the Brezhnev era onward in Soviet politics, the rationality calculation became incredibly difficult for the Soviet Union for one main reason – the system was never really bipolar in the sense that the US and Soviet Union has equal capabilities; it was far more about distribution of power, alliances and spheres of influence (and nuclear arms, of course). While it is certainly logical to argue Gorbachev's policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* represented the final straw for the Soviet system, the Soviet Union's fall from great power status became readily evident after its blunder-filled expedition to Afghanistan starting in 1979.

The realist argument about the Soviet Union was never one of equality of power, but rather, relative equality of nuclear armaments, which allowed the system to remain bipolar. In 1991, when the Soviet Union officially collapsed, it became clear that the Soviets were no longer able to maintain their nuclear arsenal (also evidenced by the Soviet willingness to embark upon SALT and START talks beforehand) and therefore the system was no longer bipolar. Since that time, the attention of international relations scholarship shifted to many other areas, and too many areas in the opinion of this writer, and the world seemed to have forgotten the Russian variable until the Putin era.

First elected in 2000, Putin inherited a corrupt, poverty-stricken, and militarily weak Russia from his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. It became evident in a very short time that Putin's approach to rebuilding Russia would mirror the ways of the Soviet Union – authoritarian rule, military spending, and political defiance on the world stage. The unique aspect of Putin's approach to Russian development that caught the attention of many was his economic platform. Under Putin, Russia's economy grew on average at 7% per year and Russia's GDP increased approximately 6 fold. Even more remarkable was the 76% growth of Russian industry. In all, Putin's Russia began to grow in virtually every way and suddenly the realist capabilities calculation could no longer ignore Russia's reemergence on the international stage.

Even so, international relations...or global politics...or globalization studies...or whatever you prefer to call it, was no longer interested with outdated realist discussions of power and capabilities. Attention has turned to humanitarianism, soft power, inequality, gender and many others issues, all the while ignoring the ongoing changes in the systemic distribution of power. What is of intrigue now, however, is that the world is currently confronted with a humanitarian crisis in Syria, and Assad is not the primary culprit anymore – Russia is.

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The Russian's have vetoed any proposal by the UN Security Council to mention Chapter VII of the UN Charter that might allow for the use of force through a western intervention in Syria. President al-Assad is of course guilty of crimes against humanity and war crimes, but Russia is the state allowing the atrocities to continue. Then noteworthy aspect in all of this is simple – by ignoring the dynamics of great power politics for so long, the world has forgotten that Russia's strategy has less to do with Syria than it does with letting the international community know of its place among the most powerful states in the world, and that it will protect its interests when/where it deems necessary.

We would all be wise to pick up a copy of Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* or Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* before asking why Russia would prevent any sort of military intervention in Syria. As the unipolar moment comes to its end we are likely in for many more situations where great power politics triumph over clandestine humanitarianism.

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Read more from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality.

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Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.