

Syria as Proof of the Unipolar Illusion

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, JUN 21 2012

In his 1993 and 2006 articles on the false interpretations of American unipolarity, Christopher Layne identified the inevitability of great powers starting to rival the United States in the coming years.[1] Many scholars, including those within the various realist camps, rejected Layne's theory and pointed to the continued preponderance of American power as a clear sign of an enduring unipolar system at the international level.

I have dedicated plenty of my own research to the question of systemic polarity, and find myself agreeing more and more with Layne's initial hypothesis that the unipolar moment is ending. I do think Layne was extraordinarily premature in discussing the end of the era as early as 1993, but since 2005, I would argue the writing has been on the proverbial wall. Costly military missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with a flailing economic structure, compel even the most firm supporters of unipolarity to think twice about the status of American power in the international system.

This is not to say the US is on the verge of collapse in terms of its capabilities, but rather, that other states have begun to emerge as rivals and this is proven by their behaviour in the system. Prior to the 2008 recession, international relations scholars were preoccupied with the growth of China and India, and these powers began to dominate the field's assumptions about where to look for the next great power rivalry with the United States. The impact of the recession has been felt heavily in both China and India, though the Chinese have recently begun to refocus their efforts on infrastructural development and military expansion. Even so, it remains a far-fetched idea that either China or India would be in a position now, or even in the near future, to pose a legitimate threat to the power position of the United States, which would seem to bolster claims about continued unipolarity.

The one power that was often overlooked throughout the pre-recession era, but that is being taken far more seriously now, is Russia. I have often argued that Russia has done a superb job in rebuilding its capabilities and must be given far more attention on the global stage in economic, political and military conversations. It is my contention that Russia poses the greatest threat to American power on the international stage, especially on a military level.

Much of this argument could focus on Arctic relations, but I think an even more prominent example has become evident in recent weeks. Presently, the world is fixated on the ongoing humanitarian disaster and government-sponsored crimes against humanity in Syria. The Assad regime is systematically murdering its own people, and shows no signs of stopping. In response, western states, including the United States, have used strong rhetoric, imposed economic sanctions, have withdrawn diplomats, and have put Syria on a political island in efforts to end the atrocities. Yet, the United Nations Security Council has been entirely absent in suggesting military intervention to protect Syrian citizens.

This is curious to many, especially in the wake of a successful 2011 military intervention by the Security Council and NATO in Libya over less egregious humanitarian atrocities. The biggest difference between Libya and Syria has more to do with great power politics than anything else.

When Resolution 1973 was presented to the Security Council in early 2011, Russia and China abstained from voting. This was not an endorsement of the action, but rather a sign that they had little interest in Libya's immediate future according to the goals of their own grand strategies. The same is not at all true in the Syrian case, especially

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to the Russians.

Russia has blatantly defied international pressure in Syria by continually excusing, protecting and arming a regime that is slaughtering its own people while under the global microscope. If unipolarity was as prevalent as it was in the 1990s, Russia would likely not challenge the United States in this way. Chances are, negotiations would have started long ago and the Russians would have backed down after striking some sort of deal for their interests in Syria. As of this moment, Russia has called the bluff of the west and remains steadfast in its rejection of military intervention in Syria.

It was only a matter of time until unipolarity came to an end, but few actually believed it would come so quickly. In 2006, Layne noted that “although a new geopolitical balance has yet to emerge, there is considerable evidence that other states have been engaging in balancing against the United States – including hard balancing.”[2] Such balancing behaviour has reached a new pinnacle in the case of Syria and states, along with the United Nations, would be wise to take this into consideration when strategizing the next steps.

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

[1] See Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why Great Powers Will Rise.” *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993): 5–51 and “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States’ Unipolar Moment.” *International Security* 31, no. 2 (2006): 7–41.

[2] Layne (2006), 12.

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