

Obama, Syria and the Fading Unipolar Moment

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, SEP 9 2013

International relations have always been a game of great power politics. Since the inception of the modern state system in 1648, the function of world affairs has been heavily dependent upon the structure of the international system and the number of powers dominating it at any given time. Polarity is determined by identifying the number of great powers in the system according to their capabilities, which include variables such as hard power (military) and also soft power (economy, territory, etc). In all, the majority of the world's states determine their actions, interests and preferences according to the number of great powers they are able to either ally with, or balance against.

As the world sits back and watches the Obama Administration fumble its way through a decision about whether to attack Syria, I am struck by just how far the US has fallen in its relative place as a unipolar hegemon.

In a 2009 *Weekly Standard* article, Charles Krauthammer argues that "Decline is a Choice" and that Obama's approach to foreign policy more than anything has contributed to America's continual transition from hegemon to one of a series of dyads likely to emerge in the coming multipolar era. Krauthammer points out that Obama's ideals about rejecting hegemony in favour of multilateral diplomacy may have earned the US President a Nobel Peace Prize but set a dangerous precedent in systemic terms. If a hegemon is unwilling to lead and behave according to its position, what happens to the international system?

To answer that question, one need only look at the events of the last few months as a perfect example of what happens when a hegemon no longer wields the level of influence and fear over other states and gets overtly challenged. An important element of hegemonic stability is the ability and willingness to extend and maintain a sphere of influence according to the hegemon's own values, and when challenged, to protect its interests. Coercive diplomacy also plays into this behaviour, as smaller or less powerful states are typically unwilling to pose a challenge to the hegemon out of fear it might respond unkindly. Hegemony is as much about perception and deterrence as it is about quantifiable capabilities calculations.

Where Krauthammer is somewhat mistaken is in his assertion that Obama is the only modern President to negatively influence American hegemony. After Somalia, Clinton's foreign policy became focused on rhetoric surrounding democratic enlargement than it did formal strategic choices to that end (Kosovo in 1999 being an interesting exception). On the other hand, George W. Bush contributed heavily to America's decline by virtue of abusing hegemonic status and making irrational choices militarily and economically. Combined with the onset of the 2008 recession, US power has been in decline for quite some time.

Obama's influence has been more noticeable in the sense of external challenges to US power and a lack of desire on Obama's part to respond. The Syria example demonstrates this well, in the sense that it is likely the Syrian Civil War would have continued without western involvement had Obama not made the blunder of speaking in absolutist terms about his now infamous "red line". Rather than serving as a deterrent to Assad, it appears to have been perceived as more of a challenge which Assad sadly responded to. Would chemical weapons have been used if Obama had not been so absolute?

Further, the use of WMD's in Syria begs the question about America's role as a hegemon capable of deterring actions of smaller states that do not adhere to the rules of a unipolar structure. Syria is protected politically and

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economically (some might also argue militarily) by the Russians, and have been promised support by Iran as well. What does this say to the US that Russia and Iran are so willing to oppose US interests, particularly on something as universally abhorred as WMD use? The clear danger here is that the deterrent effect of a hegemon is now gone, thus allowing states to alter their calculations about the use of force and possibly other WMD's in the future.

In response, Obama has eroded the power of America by being so incredibly slow to react, and domestically, he has eroded the power of the American Presidency by buckpassing to Congress. Krauthammer summarized Obama's foreign policy as one "designed to produce American decline—to make America essentially one nation among many." If this was truly Obama's goal, at least we can point to one foreign policy success during his Presidency. Meanwhile, the coming shift to multipolarity will inevitably create more instability and uncertainty while America watches its unipolar moment fade into distant memory.

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Read more from Robert W. Murray on his e-IR blog [Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality](#).

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