

The End of History Ends

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For the first time since the Cold War, the United States is going to have to adopt a coherent Eurasian strategy that integrates European, Middle Eastern, South Asian and East Asian policy into a comprehensive design.

Sometime in 2013, we reached a new stage in world history. A coalition of great powers has long sought to overturn the post Cold War Eurasian settlement that the United States and its allies imposed after 1990; in the second half of 2013 that coalition began to gain ground. The revisionist coalition hasn't achieved its objectives, and the Eurasian status is still quo, but from this point on we will have to speak of that situation as contested, and American policymakers will increasingly have to respond to a challenge that, until recently, most chose to ignore.

Call the challengers the Central Powers; they hate and fear one another as much as they loathe the current geopolitical order, but they are joined at the hip by the belief that the order favored by the United States and its chief allies is more than

an inconvenience. The big three challengers — Russia, China and Iran — all hate, fear and resent the current state of Eurasia. The balance of power it enshrines thwarts their ambitions; the norms and values it promotes pose deadly threats to their current regimes. Until recently there wasn't much they could do but resent the world order; now, increasingly, they think they have found a way to challenge and ultimately to change the way global politics work.

This is not, yet, a pre-war situation. The Central Powers know that they can't challenge the United States, the EU, Japan and the various affiliates and associates of what we might call the Maritime Association head on. The military and economic facts on the ground would make such a challenge suicidal. But if they can't challenge the world system head on, they can chip away at its weak spots and, where the maritime powers leave a door unlatched or a window open, they can make a quick move. They can use our own strategic shortsightedness against us, they can weaken the adhesion of our core alliances, and they can use the mechanisms of the international system (above all, the United Nations Security Council where Russia and China both wield the veto) to throw bananas in our path.

Lacking the strength for a head on confrontation, they are opportunistic feeders. They look for special circumstances where the inattention, poor judgment or domestic political constraints of the status quo powers offer opportunities. Russia's strike against Georgia was one such move; both Russia and Iran have skillfully exploited the divisions among the Americans and their allies over the horror in Syria.

Think of the Central Powers as an 'axis of weevils'. At this stage they are looking to hollow out the imposing edifice of American and maritime power rather than knock it over. This is not the most formidable alliance the United States has ever faced. Not everything the Central Powers want is bad; like all revisionist powers, they have legitimate grievances against the status quo. They don't always agree, and in the long run their differences with one another are profound. But for now, they have not only agreed that they have a common interest in weakening the United States in Eurasia and disrupting its alliances; increasingly, with the United States government still largely blind to the challenge, they are pushing ahead.

A Miraculous Fall

A happy Thanksgiving week capped off a successful fall for the Axis of Weevils. As President Obama pardoned a turkey in the Rose Garden and millions of other gobblers headed for the ovens, the three big Eurasian powers seeking to gnaw away at the post-Cold War order across the world's greatest landmass are celebrating big wins.

Iran should be giddy with joy; pro-administration commentary from the White House and its media allies has focused on the nuclear technicalities to paint the deal as a success, but there is no disguising the immense diplomatic gains that Tehran made. Washington hasn't just loosened sanctions as part of a temporary negotiation; it is opening the door to a broader relationship with Iran at a time when Iran and its Shia proxies are making unprecedented gains across the Middle East. Just as President Obama essentially allowed President Assad of Syria to trade a promise to get rid of his chemical weapons for what amounts to a de facto end to US efforts to push his blood stained regime out of power, so Iran believes it can trade a promise to end its nuclear program for American acquiescence to its domination of the Fertile Crescent and, potentially, the Gulf. This would be an epochal shift in the global balance of

power and the consequences — in strained alliances and diminished US influence and prestige — are already being felt.

After the nuclear deal came more joy for Tehran; as the *New York Times* reports, morale is flagging and unity is fraying among the Syrian opposition even as Butcher Assad's ground forces continue to grind out more gains. Mussolini and Hitler used to have days like this as Franco's forces slowly and painfully crushed the Spanish Republic — while a divided west stood by, wringing its hands at the slaughter and dithering over the unsavory nature of the Republican coalition. As the sanctions ease, there will be more money to support Assad and Hezbollah; at a critical moment the United States is giving Iran access to more resources for war. Meanwhile, far from showing restraint, Iran continues to push the envelope of what was agreed in the nuclear talks, as officials announce ambitious plans for lots more nuclear reactors, including more heavy water reactors like the one at Arak. In effect, the United States has tilted toward Iran in the Sunni-Shi'a war; both friends and foes are scratching their heads.

President Putin, meanwhile, is giving hearty thanks for one of Russia's biggest successes since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Kremlin is high-fiving its stunning, come-from-behind victory as Ukraine said a polite "No thank you" to the European Union's offer of an economic association agreement. While the final shape of Russia's neighborhood remains to be seen, and protests have erupted against the government's decision in Kiev, an EU-Ukraine agreement would have gutted Putin's international strategy and hit his standing at home. Flabby and uncertain European diplomacy (as we wrote earlier, the EU brought a baguette to a knife fight in the Ukrainian dispute) enabled a weak Russia to grab the gold.

Putin may not be able to hold onto his prize, but for now he can justly boast of having outwitted and bested the EU on one of the biggest issues of the day.

It's been tougher going in the Far East; China's declaration of a special air defense zone over the East China Sea met with mockery and disdain from the neighbors until Washington stepped in with a face saving concession. After US bombers blew through the zone, Japan and South Korea followed up with flights of their own. Japanese civilian air carriers

announced plans to comply with China's demand, but after the display of resolution from Tokyo and Washington, they stiffened their spines and announced that they would not change their flight procedures to suit China's new zone.

They should have waited a bit longer; the US government has asked American airlines to comply with the new China zone. At one level, this is straightforward common sense; the military will continue to defy Chinese restrictions, but civilian flights out of an abundance of caution will bend over backwards to keep themselves (and their passengers) out of trouble. But China declared this zone in violation of the usual procedures and it is highly unlikely that Beijing would harass civilian aircraft bringing customers and investors to its hungry economy. In context, Beijing is likely to see Washington's advice to US airlines as less of an olive branch than a white flag — a sign that Washington's 'pivot to Asia' is more about hot air than real political will.

China believes that time is on its side in the region, and that the Obama administration and the American people generally don't have the persistence to stand up against a long, slow increase in diplomatic and military pressure in East Asia. Like Russia and Iran, China believes that Washington's first goal in

many confrontations is to find a face saving way to retreat; expect more initiatives from Beijing as it takes advantage of what increasingly is seen globally as a period of drift and vulnerability in American foreign policy. The Chinese are not only putting more military aircraft into their East China Sea air defense zone; they are reportedly planning to proclaim new air defense zones over other hotspots.

As the Indian strategic analyst Brahma Chellaney points out, China seems to be adopting what PLA General Zhang Zhaozhong called a “cabbage strategy:”

assert a territorial claim and gradually surround the area with multiple layers of security, thus denying access to a rival. The strategy relies on a steady progression of steps to outwit opponents and create new facts on the ground.

Chellaney suggests that China’s proclamation of the air defense zone is part of a region-wide pattern that expands China’s reach without triggering a strong US response:

To be sure, China is careful to avoid any dramatic action that could become a *casus belli* by itself. Indeed, it has repeatedly shown a knack for disaggregating its strategy into multiple parts and then pursuing each element separately in such a manner as to allow the different pieces to fall into place with minimal resistance.

This shrewdness not only keeps opponents off balance; it also undercuts the relevance of US security assurances to allies and the value of building countervailing strategic partnerships in Asia. In fact, by camouflaging offense as defense, China casts the burden of starting a war on an opponent, while it seeks to lay the foundation – brick by brick – of a hegemonic Middle Kingdom. Chinese leaders' stated desire to resolve territorial disputes peacefully simply means achieving a position strong enough to get their way without having to fire a shot.

If this is the game, Washington's decision to advise civilian aircraft to observe the new zone has played right into Beijing's strategy and will strengthen perceptions in Beijing and

elsewhere that the American position in Asia is already on the wane.

Myopia in DC?

Just as China's cabbage strategy depends on flying just under America's radar, advancing Chinese claims without triggering the kind of confrontation which the Middle Kingdom cannot (yet) win, so the Central Powers generally prosper best when American diplomacy doesn't grasp the nature of the game. Fortunately for them, many American analysts and most if not all senior officials in the Obama administration have yet to sense or to interpret the change in the weather.

Three factors keep many Americans inside the government and out from connecting the dots. The first is the habit of supremacy developed in the last generation. From the middle of the 1980s on, the declining Soviet Union and its successor states were no match for the United States. China's horizons were more limited than they are now. And after the triumph of the First Iraq War demonstrated America's overwhelming conventional military supremacy in the Middle East, American attention turned to managing specific issues (like

terrorism, WMD and the Arab Spring) on the assumption that the United States no longer faced significant geopolitical rivals in the region.

The strategic dimension in the sense of managing intractable relations with actual or potential geopolitical adversaries largely disappeared from American foreign policy debates. Instead, American foreign policy was about “issues” (like non-proliferation, human rights, terrorism, inequality, free trade) and “hard cases” (rogue states like Iraq and North Korea and non-state actors like Al-Qaeda that could cause trouble but were unlikely to affect the global power balance in a serious way). The balance of power in Eurasia, the great question which forced the United States into two world wars and a long cold war, largely disappeared from American policy thought.

The disappearance of geopolitics reinforced a second tendency in American foreign policy that further hampered American ability to perceive and respond to the new challenge. That is the habitual American tendency, fruitlessly bewailed by actors as different as George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, to approach international politics through some combination of moral and legal ideas in an uncomplicated atmosphere of

Whig determinism. The default worldview of American intellectuals and officials is that some combination of liberal capitalist economics and liberal political values is carrying the world swiftly and smoothly toward the triumph of Anglo-American values. Americans believed they were living through the end of history long before Francis Fukuyama wrote his book; that free markets and free government will bring the world right is one of the deepest convictions of the American mind. Ask Woodrow Wilson.

Moralists and legalists were both very comfortable in the post Cold War world in which American hegemony seemed to have created a flat, global reality in which moral and legal questions trumped geopolitical ones. In a world without serious geopolitical issues, one can debate policy toward, say, Burma or Egypt based on one's analysis of whether a given American policy supported 'transitions to democracy' in those countries without thinking too much about such depressing realities as the balance of power. Libya could be treated as a humanitarian and a legal issue rather than a strategic one. Similarly, in looking at Iran many people inside and outside the Obama administration see either a challenge to the legal norms of the non-proliferation system or a moral challenge to human rights as understood in much of the world.

This mindset makes possible what would otherwise seem patently absurd: a negotiation over Iran’s nuclear proliferation that proceeds without regard to the destabilizing consequences of Iran’s growing geopolitical reach—and the effect that that reach has on the policies and perceptions of both allies and adversaries around the world.

The “end of history” that many American analysts unconsciously identified with an era of largely effortless and uncontested American global hegemony is an era in which no one has to connect the dots. Because there are few or no serious strategic consequences to anything that happens, every issue can be addressed in isolation and policy can become the progressive application of legal and moral norms grounded in American hegemony to various refractory countries and problem regimes around the world.

In such a world the lawyers and the moralists are free to address each question in isolation; the toe-bone isn’t connected to the foot-bone, and the foot-bone isn’t connected to anything. We can “work to solidify legal norms” without asking whether the whole structure is in danger of coming down; we can indulge our propensity to give human rights lectures without concern for the consequences. We can push

Mubarak to the exit without thinking much about what comes next; we can spend a year trying to support an imaginary transition to democracy in Egypt; we can prevent a hypothetical bloodbath in the strategic dead end of Libya while ignoring a much larger actual bloodbath in strategically vital Syria and it is all about us and our values. If we do something smart and succeed, we feel good about ourselves; if things go badly we feel bad and try to change the subject. But the consequences are abstractions: the strengthening or weakening of international norms, the value of our example, the “legacy” of agreements and achievements an administration leaves behind.

For a full generation we have not had to think too much

For a full generation we have not had to think too much about whether something done or undone in foreign policy promotes or endangers our vital interests and the security and prosperity of the American people. We have gotten out of

the habit of making foreign policy under the gun and as a result we are not as a people very good at understanding what matters and why.

Finally, optimism is so ineradicably grounded in American intellectual culture that even our great power realists are instinctively hopeful. Troubled by the costs and the risks associated with two unsatisfactory foreign wars and longing to redirect resources from the defense budget to domestic priorities, a significant number of foreign policy analysts inside and outside the current administration have developed a theory of benign realism. This theory holds that the United States can safely withdraw from virtually all European and all but a handful of Middle Eastern issues and that as an ‘offshore balancer’ the United States will be able to safeguard its essential interests at low cost.

This view, which seems to guide both the administration and some of the neo-isolationist thinking on the right, assumes that a reasonably benign post-American balance of power is latent in the structure of international life and will emerge if we will just get out of the way. Such a view is not very historical: Britain was an offshore balancer in Europe in the 18th century and was involved in almost continuous wars with France from 1689 to 1815. What is missing from the ‘peaceful withdrawal’ scenarios is an understanding that there are hostile and, from our point of view, destructive powers in the world who will

actively seize on any leverage we give them and will seek to use their new power and resources to remake the world in ways we find fundamentally objectionable and unsafe.

Iran, Russia and China won't, one increasingly suspects, see American withdrawal as a call to moderate their ambitions or revise their revisionist opposition to the current world order. The appetite for power grows as one feeds, and political cultures deeply wedded to the concept of zero-sum outcomes in international affairs are unlikely to be 'led by our example' to embrace the idea of 'win-win' at just the moment they are intoxicated by the enchanting vision of winning it all as we fade away.

As the End of History Ends, Strategy Must Return

It's often said that statesmen in office live on intellectual capital, and work with the ideas and perceptions they brought to power. The crush of events gives them little choice. It will, therefore, be difficult for the White House to change direction quickly even as evidence of a wrong turn piles up.

If the Central Powers continue to work together and to make joint progress across Eurasia, however, either this administration or its successor is going to have to take another

look at world politics. For the first time since the Cold War, the United States is going to have to adopt a coherent Eurasian strategy that integrates European, Middle Eastern, South Asian and East Asian policy into a comprehensive design. We shall have to think about “issues” like non-proliferation and democracy promotion in a geopolitical context and we shall have to prioritize the repair and defense of alliances in ways that no post Cold War presidents have done.

The sooner we make this shift, the better off we shall be. The Central Powers have been punching above their weight, largely as a result of the absence of a serious counter-policy by the United States. But the more time we waste and the more opportunities we squander, the more momentum and power the revisionists gain, and the less effective our alliances become.

Clear thinking and prudent action now can probably reverse the negative geopolitical trends in Eurasia at a low cost. But the longer we wait, the harder and more urgent our task will become.

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