

## CHANGING DYNAMICS OF THE WORLD ORDER: CASE-STUDY OF RUSSIA'S POWER PLAY IN UKRAINE AND SYRIA

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### Abstract

*No world order has survived forever. Historically change has always been a perpetual feature of international system. Despite the fact that the Americans have been dominating international politics for the past three decades, there has also been a parallel debate about the future of their supremacy and the sustainability of unipolar world order. Though, no state has surpassed the US' relative economic and military strength in the contemporary era, but the prevailing geostrategic environment is indicative of apparent changes in the global political dynamics. The prevalent global political and security situation, especially Russia's power play in Ukraine and Syria suggests: (1) resurgence of Russia as a key actor in international politics; (2) re-distribution of power in international system; and, (3) a shift in the existing world order away from unipolarity. It might be too early to predict as to what could be the nature of emerging world order, but the above three assumptions do merit an academic inquiry.*

**Key Words:** *World Order, unipolarity, multipolarity, resurgence, supremacy, power play, security*

### Introduction

America's time as a dominant player in world politics started with its entry in the First World War in 1917. However, during the Cold War, it shared global dominance with the former Soviet Union in a bipolar world structure. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 placed the US in the driving seat in the new unipolar world order. Despite American dominance for the past three decades, there has also been a parallel debate amongst scholars of international relations about the future of the US in the prevalent anarchic world order. Many claims that US rule will continue for an indefinite period. Few go to the extent of saying that even

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the 21<sup>st</sup> century belongs to America. Some analysts regard 1991 as the possible date for the beginning of the American century when it became the only nation able to project military power on a global scale.<sup>1</sup>

Political philosophers from the Liberal school of thought claim that the American century is not yet over. Conversely, pundits of the Realist paradigm indicate visible signs of an American decline. Where Ian Bremmer pens down as many as five reasons for the continuity of Washington's rule,<sup>2</sup> Noam Chomsky argues with firm conviction that US power has been diminishing.<sup>3</sup> There is yet a third opinion group, led by Fareed Zakaria, which claims that the US may not be losing its absolute power, but at the same time, a number of other powers are emerging on the political globe.<sup>4</sup>

According to David Singer, a state's power is determined by its capabilities and intentions. The US dominance for three decades has been marked by its supremacy in military and economic capabilities, besides its will (intentions) to rule the world order. Though no state has surpassed the United States' relative economic and military strength during this era, political analysts have been focusing their discussion on three powers as potential threats to US dominance. Since European countries and China either lack capabilities or will, they pose no serious threat to the US. However, Russia is the only country which has shown its eagerness to reclaim its place in international politics while demonstrating its power in Ukraine and Syria in the recent past.

Ever since the dramatic events between 1989 and 1991, the Republic of Russia, considering itself as the legal heir of the former Soviet Union, has been in search of its lost identity and a renewed role in the world arena. While many, representing the nationalist school of thought, have been arguing that Russia should remain associated with its historic legacy of Marxism-Leninism; others, from the liberal school, believe that the republic should forget its past and open a new chapter of cooperation with the West. There is, however, a third viewpoint prevailing in the Russian elite which suggests adopting a middle course of action, i.e. cooperating with the West while not compromising on Russia's imperial legacy. A critical analysis of Russia's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era suggests that their leadership has been following a consistent policy of Russia's assertiveness on the world stage. Struggling to recover from the breakup of the Soviet Union, their elite developed a deep-seated desire to re-emerge as a "Great Power."

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Is the American Century Over* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Bremmer, "These are five reasons why the US remains the world's only superpower," *Time*, May 28, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Noam Chomsky, "Losing the world: American decline in perspective, Part-1," *The Guardian*, February 14, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Future of American Power," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008: 42-43.

An assessment of the Russian post-Cold War character from its military actions in Chechnya (1996) and Georgia (2008) to the recent power play in Ukraine and Syria, suggests that Russia has never accepted the unipolar world order and its relegation to the status of an ordinary power. Since the recent past, the Republic of Russia has been on the forefront of global *realpolitik*, gaining the attention of all international powerbrokers. Russia's intervention in Ukrainian domestic politics, especially the episode of the annexation of Crimea, brought the US and the West to a crossroads of their foreign policies. Before the global actors could formulate a befitting response to the Ukrainian crisis, Russia started demonstrating its muscle in the Syrian theatre.

The prevalent global political and security situation, especially the ongoing situation in Ukraine and Syria, suggests three probabilities: (1) resurgence of Russia as a key actor in international politics; (2) redistribution of power in the international system; and, (3) a shift in the existing world order away from unipolarity towards multipolarity. It might be too early to predict as to what could be the nature of the emerging world order, but the above three assumptions do merit an academic inquiry. This paper is an attempt to examine this unfolding trend.

Hypothesizing that Russia's power play in Ukraine and Syria is indicative of a global power shift away from unipolarity, the following questions agitate the researchers' mind: Is the US dream of global dominance during the 21<sup>st</sup> century over? Does the unipolar moment of the world order cease to exist with military intervention and power play of a resurgent Russia in Ukraine and Syria? What is the role of Russia in the emerging trends of the global political canvas? What would be the nature of the new international order and what would be the place of Russia in the new system? And, will the new global power structure ensure international peace and stability?

## **Inconsistent Behaviour of Global Architecture**

The world system has always been subjected to perpetual change. Henry Kissinger was not wrong in saying that "no truly global 'world order' has ever existed."<sup>5</sup> Almost all pundits of international politics – including Hans Morgenthau and Friedrich Kratochwil – share a common view, namely that the Peace Treaty of Westphalia gave birth to the modern state system.<sup>6</sup> They argue that as such, there existed no such world system in the pre-Westphalian era. As the world was organized into city-states,

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflection on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (New York, Penguin Group, 2014). 2.

<sup>6</sup> H. Morgenthau *Politics Among Nations*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1967), 299, and F. Kratochwil, "Of Systems, Boundaries and Territoriality: An Inquiry into the Formation of the State System," *World Politics* 34no 1 (1986): 27-52.

relations within political units were controlled by various empires such as those led by the Persians, Romans, Arabs, Chinese, Moguls, Mayans, Aztecs etc. With no or a vague concept of defined boundaries and sovereignty, there prevailed neither anarchy nor hierarchy in the international system. It could best be described as an 'anarchic' world order. Furthermore, in the absence of any global political actor and tussle for tilting the balance of power in their favour, there existed non-polarity in the global architecture. Different forms of supranational religious clergies – especially the Catholic Church in Medieval Europe – and a complex mosaic of subnational and transnational entities with independent military capabilities, defined the primitive international composition.

Certain historians, such as Martin Wight, identify the commencement of an evolutionary process in the global political architecture with the Peace Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. It just materialized as a result of massive human suffering in Europe and especially the failure of Church reforms in late 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> The Peace of Westphalia (1648), besides introducing the concept of sovereignty to a newly emerged state system, also triggered a political tussle amongst states to play a leading role in world politics. Since no political actor was in a position to play a decisive role on the basis of its military and economic capabilities, power remained diffused.

Modern day theorists recall the period from 1648 to 1945 as an era of multipolarity – even, some historians, like Thomas M. Magstadt, regard it as a “classical multipolar system” – where the classical balance of power prevailed in Europe. In the multipolar world order, the Great Powers status was enjoyed by Great Britain, France, Russia, Prussia (later Germany), Austria-Hungry, Spain, and Sweden.<sup>8</sup>

The era of multipolarity lasted for about three centuries. The end of World War II also marked the end of European, especially Great Britain's, dominance in world affairs. Due to the failure of war-torn European powers in sustaining the status quo, two new players – the US and the USSR – emerged in the international system. The next half of the century remained subjected to a bipolar world order with its basic character of a Cold War between the two superpowers.

This bipolarity in the international system was sustained for about half a century before the world witnessed the demise of the world's largest Communist empire. Fukuyama was not content with just being a witness to the end of the Cold War and the commencement of the unipolar moment; rather he termed it as the 'end of history': that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and universalization of Western liberal

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<sup>7</sup> M. Wight, “The Origins of Our States-System: Chronological Limits,” in H. Bull (ed.), *Systems of States*, (Leicester, Leicester University Press). 129-152.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas M. Magstadt, *Understanding Politics: Ideas, Institutions and Issues* Belmont, (Belmont, Cengage Learning, 2013). 478.

democracy as the final form of human government.<sup>9</sup> Whether the empirical evidence of the post-Cold War era confirmed his hypothesis or not, the one thing, which is clear, is that the unipolar moment has since been marked with US supremacy in all spheres of global politics.

### **Sustainability of Prevalent Unipolarity**

The international scholarly community, besides discussing which kind of system is comparatively beneficial for global peace and the system's stability, has also been involved in a scholarly debate on the sustainability of American rule. The main questions agitating the minds of political thinkers include the following: firstly, for how long shall American supremacy in international order prevail; and, secondly, is American supremacy declining?

Academics from both the Realist and Liberal schools of thought share different opinions. Josef Joffe and William C. Wohlforth argue that US dominance is not declining. Joffe declares the US as the default power because there is nobody else with the requisite power and purpose.<sup>10</sup> Whereas, for Wohlforth, American supremacy would sustain for decades as it has no rival in any critical dimension of power<sup>11</sup> and enjoys a much larger margin of superiority over other states.

A number of critics, like Christopher Layne and Richard Haas, claim that the US is losing its power in world politics. Layne considers the US claim of its hegemonic exceptionalism as weak and argues that hegemony cannot endure indefinitely.<sup>12</sup> Haas, on the other hand, predicts that "the international politics of the twenty-first century would be dominated by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of powers."<sup>13</sup>

There is yet a third school of thought, which proclaims a relative decline in US supremacy. Fareed Zakaria contends that today we are passing through yet another power shift of the modern era – "the rise of the rest" – and entering into a post-American world.<sup>14</sup> Joseph Nye also shares a similar opinion but draws a different analogy of power

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<sup>9</sup> Frances Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. (Simon and Schuster, 2006), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Josef Joffe, "The Default Power: The False Prophecy of American's Decline," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept/Oct 2009 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2009-08-17/default-power>.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2000). 37.

<sup>13</sup> Richard N. Haas, "The Age of Non-polarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance" *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2008-05-03/age-nonpolarity>.

<sup>14</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Future of American Power," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, 42-43.

distribution in the world. He maintains that the distribution pattern of power in the world resembles a “three-dimensional chess game.” At the top of the chessboard, the US maintains unipolarity by virtue of its military power. In the middle, there is multipolarity in economic power among the US, China, Japan, Europe and other emerging nations. Finally, at the bottom of the chessboard, power is widely diffused among various non-state actors, presenting no sense of polarity or other such clichés.<sup>15</sup>

## The Potential Challengers

The other query stirring the mind of the researchers is regarding the potential contenders for power in the post-American era. David Singer claims that a state’s threat perception constitutes both its estimated capabilities and estimated intentions. He expresses this by establishing a quasi-mathematical relationship: “Threat Perception=Estimated Capability X Estimated Intent.”<sup>16</sup> Some also present the equation as Threat Perception = Estimated Capabilities + Estimated Intent. The US global dominance for three decades clearly demonstrates US intentions to rule the world, besides its supremacy in military and economic capabilities. The other contenders lack in either capabilities or intent.

European states like the UK, France, and Germany, are perceived as being neither capable nor willing to defy the US in the near future. To many scholars China, by virtue of its unprecedented economic rise, is capable of posing a threat to the US political monopoly; but it has not given any strategic signals to disturb the global status quo. The Chinese leadership, rather, has long been harping on the theme of its “harmonious and peaceful rise.”<sup>17</sup> Contrary to both the above examples, Russia is the only country, which has shown its eagerness to reclaim its lost status in international politics. There is, however, a big question mark on Russia’s capability to alter the world order. The recent developments in Ukraine and Syria in which Russia has expounded its military might have forced world leaders and analysts to review their conjectures about Russia.

## Recent Developments and Russia’s Power Play

Historically, Russia has fought many wars with Europe and remained an archrival of the US in a bipolar world order. The Napoleonic Wars, the two World Wars, and the Cold War all dealt, at least in part, with the status of Russia and its relationship with rest of Europe.<sup>18</sup> By virtue of

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Is the American Century Over* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>16</sup> David Singer, “Threat-perception and armament-tension dilemma,” *The Journal of Conflict*, March 1958; 2, 1; ABI/INFORM Global. 94.

<sup>17</sup> Sujian Guo et al (ed), *“Harmonious World” and the new China foreign policy* (New York, Lexington Books, 2008), 1.

<sup>18</sup> George Friedman, *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (London, Allison & Busby, 2010), 101.

its huge size and possession of immense natural resources, Russia has always been a lucrative target of other powers for military adventures. Empirical evidence suggests that invaders were either defeated by Russia or were so exhausted from fighting them that someone else defeated them.<sup>19</sup>

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was a great shock for Russia as it had been an equal partner of the US in power sharing during the bipolar world order. Most analysts, especially in the West, considering Russia out of the power-game, argued that it was left with no role to play in future world politics. The recent developments in Ukraine and Syria have come as a setback to their hypothesis, where Russia, demonstrating its political resurgence, has directly challenged US supremacy in regional and international decision-making. An analysis of Russian involvement in both Ukraine and Syria is instructive in identifying visible changes to the existing unipolar world order.

## **The Case-Study of Ukraine**

### **Historical perspective**

Historically, Ukraine had to struggle for about three centuries to become an independent country. After remaining part of many dynasties, Ukraine fought its War of Independence (1917-1921), resulting in the establishment of a Ukrainian republic which later joined the Soviet Union. The USSR had always kept Ukraine within its geopolitical ambit because of its extremely high wheat production, a transit route for Russian gas supply line to Europe, and the presence of the headquarters of Russian Black Sea Fleet in the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol. In 1953, Nikita Khrushchev came into power. He belonged to a small village close to the Ukrainian border and in order to alleviate Ukraine's sufferings, he gifted Crimea to Ukraine. Khrushchev, however, never visualized the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine becoming an independent country.

### **Recent crisis**

The root cause of the prevailing crisis can be traced back to November 2013, when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign a free-trade agreement with the EU under pressure from Moscow. It resulted in violent countrywide demonstrations. This was followed by the impeachment of the president by the Parliament on February 22, 2014, and the installation of an interim government. The dethroned president, in order to avoid his arrest, escaped and appeared in a press conference in southern Russia on February 28, 2014. This, in fact, marked the beginning of Russia's intervention in Ukraine. The next day, Russia's parliament passed a resolution regarding deployment of Russian forces in Ukraine.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

This was succeeded by the Russian army's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

On March 16, 2014, Russia held a referendum in Crimea over its fate. Over ninety-seven percent Crimean citizens voted in favour of joining Russia. Analyzing Russia's strident claim of Crimea's "right of return" and the methodology adopted in organizing the referendum, one can simply argue – in a Realist paradigm – that in the international arena, principles are decided by power.

The return of Crimea, though, went unchallenged as the international community remained divided on initiating any response against Russia. Yet the pro-Western Ukrainian regime has remained a constant source of concern for Moscow. Some international relations scholars, like Mearsheimer, have argued that the Kremlin considered the prospect of losing Ukraine to the West a disastrous external security threat, especially if Ukraine were offered NATO membership.<sup>20</sup> This prompted Putin to support the rebel groups in Eastern Ukraine which is – by all definitions – the direct military commitment of Russia in neighbouring Ukraine.

Although Putin has partially succeeded in achieving his long-term objectives in Ukraine and the establishment of a pro-Russian government, the turmoil in Eastern Europe still haunts policymakers in the US.

## **The Case Study of Syria**

The prevailing security situation in Syria and Iraq has also been one of the contributing factors in altering the global power-sharing equation. Besides proving to be a bloody battlefield of Russian and US-led proxies, the case-study of the two countries is also a classical example of convergence and divergence of great powers' interests, showing their conflicts and cooperation in the same theatre of war. An analysis of the Syrian crisis is vital in understanding the changing dynamics of the prevailing geopolitical environment.

### **Genesis of the crisis and rise of ISIS**

The current grim situation in Syria is thought to be the by-product of the Arab Spring, but its roots can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the whole of the Middle East was part of either the British or French colonial empires. Syria houses a population that is 74 percent Sunni, 16 per cent Shiite – also called Alawites – and 10 percent Christian. It has been ruled by the Alawites since the 1920s when Syria became a French colony after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. There were, however, no sectarian issues in the country, especially during Hafez al-Assad's regime from 1970 to 2000. His son and the present incumbent Bashar al-

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Person, "Here's why Putin wants to topple Ukraine's government, not to engineer a frozen conflict," *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2015.



Assad, conversely, lost the strategic balance by turning the Sunni population against his regime.

The demography of Syria's next-door neighbour, Iraq, is quite the opposite, where Shiite Muslims are in majority with 60-65 percent, against Sunni Muslims with 30-35 percent, of the total population. Historically, the Shiites were denied their right to govern as they opposed the British occupation of Iraq during the First World War, and the reins of power were delegated to the minority Sunni Arabs, by the Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill. Any protest against the minority's rule in Iraq has been brutally suppressed. During Saddam's regime alone, half a million Shiites perished. The minority rule in Iraq ended with Saddam's ouster in 2003.

The present scenario in the Middle East, though, emerged from the Arab-Spring - ignited in Tunisia in 2011 as a political movement to overthrow authoritarian regimes - but its present picture is purely sectarian, which emerged due to the strategic linkage of the Arab-Spring with Sunni resistance movements.

Interestingly, the White House has been playing quite an opposing role in Iraq and Syria. While it has been supporting Sunni fighters against the Syrian Shiite regime, simultaneously it has also been supporting the Iraqi Shiite government in crushing Sunni militants. One thing which US analysts missed out was the strategic linkage of opposition Sunni groups both in Syria and Iraq fighting against their regimes. This strategic linkage of all interest groups provided an opportunity to radical groups to carve out ISIS and make the region a cockpit for conflicts.

### **Present situation**

From the beginning of the revolt against President Assad in 2011, Syria has been a battleground for: (1) the US-led proxy, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and even Israel - all supporting the Syrian Sunni rebels to topple Assad; and, (2) the Sino-Russian led proxy constituting Iran and the states of Iraq and Syria - supporting Bashar al-Assad against the Sunni fighters.

The prevailing situation in Syria is even worse as allies - with different strategic objectives - lack a consensus on one common enemy to fight. The United States' biggest challenge is to build a coalition to fight against al-Assad, though not ISIS. US ally, Turkey, stands against al-Assad and ISIS, but in fact, wants to sort out the Kurds.<sup>21</sup> Israel is threatened by Iran. Similarly, for Saudi Arabia - entangled with enemies on its periphery - a change of Assad's regime seems to be the last priority.

The footprints of Russian ground forces in Syria have been quite visible since August 2015, followed by rapid deployment of its Air Defence assets. As per the details, Putin and al-Assad signed an agreement of

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<sup>21</sup> Luay Al Khateeb and Abbas Kadhim, "How to work with Russia in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, October 18, 2015.

military alliance between Moscow and Damascus in August 2015, granting a large degree of operational freedom to Russian forces in Syria.<sup>22</sup> On September 30, 2015, Russia also started its air strikes against ISIS.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the situation in Syria is at an all-time low. With more than half of its population displaced and 300,000 people dead, the civil war in Syria is the greatest catastrophe of our time.<sup>24</sup> The failed US foreign policy in Syria has provided gaps to Russia to intervene.

## Analyzing the Indicators of Change

The Russian intervention in Ukraine's domestic politics and in Syria has extensive implications for the global political and security situation. The Structural or Neorealist Theory of International Relations presumes that in the anarchic international system, the distribution of power is measured by the number of great powers within the system. Furthermore, states act according to the logic of self-help, meaning they seek their own interest and will not subordinate their interests to those of other states. Almost all the proponents of neorealism, including Waltz and Mearsheimer, believe that states are power seekers looking to secure their vital security interests.

Russian power play in both Ukraine and Syria has multiple dimensions, once analyzed in the Neorealist paradigm. The same are discussed in the next section.

## Revival of Russian Imperialism

Ever since the collapse of Kremlin's Empire, Russians have been in search of their lost identity and a renewed role in the international community. Despite losing the "Great Power" status – replaced by the reference to Russia as "one of the leading centres of the contemporary world" and repeated mention of a "new Russia"<sup>25</sup> – the notion of retrieving its position has remained an important goal of Russia's foreign policy. Russian elite perception – more specifically Putin's foreign policy philosophy of a resurgent Russia – promotes a global power shift and the emergence of a multipolar world, with Russia as one of the independent poles.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald Oliphant and Louisa Loveluck, "Russian forces to stay in Syria 'indefinitely' under deal with Assad," *The Telegraph*, January 15, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Kyle Orton and James Snell, "In Syria, Russia and Iran reap the harvest of Obama's failed foreign policy," *National Review*, October 1, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/424873/syria-russia-and-iran-reap-harvest-obamas-failed-foreign-policy-kyle-orton-james>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Dr Rémi Piet and Professor Roger E Kane eds., *Shifting Priorities in Russia's Foreign and Security Policy* (Surrey, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2014), 183.

Russia's first show of force after the demise of the Communist block was in Chechnya, in 1994 and 1999. The second major demonstration of their muscle was in 2008, with its military adventure in Georgia. In all three wars, Russia successfully achieved its strategic objectives. However, for the Western leadership – entangled in a world containing rogue states seeking nuclear weapons, rapidly growing China, and Al-Qaeda – Russia did not figure as a major threat.<sup>27</sup>

Recent developments in the neighbourhood of Russia i.e. Ukraine and the Middle East – more specifically in Syria, Iran and Iraq – suggest that Moscow is determined to tilt the global centre of gravity in its favour. With China and Iran by its side, Russia has successfully managed to achieve its strategic foreign-policy goal of re-emerging as a key player in world politics. Most importantly, with Beijing's partnership, Moscow views itself as a counterweight to Washington as the centre of global power and feels able to promote itself as a global "Great Power," one of the winners in the post-American world.<sup>28</sup>

### **Fault Lines in the US Myth of Exceptionalism**

The American leadership, bureaucracy and a large segment of academia have always propagated the theme of American exceptionalism. The concept presumes that America's values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration.<sup>29</sup> Since long, the US elite has been contextualizing various strands of exceptionalism in the formulation and implementation of their foreign policy. The grim pictures of Ukraine and Syria have broken the US myth of exceptionalism. The phenomenon is worth analyzing from the three following perspectives:

Firstly, since 1991, the US has been investing heavily – nearly \$5 billion<sup>30</sup> – in Ukraine in, what they call, building democratic skills and institutions. It is presumed that the US, in February 2014, had supported a coup in Ukraine against the democratically elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich. President Obama, during an interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria, acknowledged that Washington had "brokered a deal to transition power in Ukraine," thus admitting to a high level of

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<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Dr Rémi Piet and Professor Roger E. Kane, eds., *Shifting Priorities in Russia's Foreign and Security Policy* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2014), 184.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen M Walt, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> "Brokering power: US role in Ukraine coup hard to overlook," *RT: Question more*, February 19, 2015, <<https://www.rt.com/news/233439-us-meddling-ukraine-crisis/>> (accessed October 31, 2015)

democratic impropriety.<sup>31</sup> The rest is what the world has been witnessing since then.

The flawed US foreign policy in Ukraine has resulted in: (1) exposing the American myth of exceptionalism; (2) divulging cracks in their decision-making machinery; (3) proving the historic empirical evidences of US involvement in other nations' affairs; (4) driving the whole Eastern European region into a security crisis; and (5) failure to anticipate Russia's reaction and providing a justification to Putin to intervene in the name of securing its national interests.

Secondly, in the Syrian crisis, the US failed miserably on two accounts: in its long term "anticipatory intelligence" and policy failure. According to James Clipper, the Director of US national intelligence, analysts in the US had been reporting the emergence of ISIS and its "prowess and capabilities", but the White House administration failed to predict ISIS's will to fight. US policy in the Middle East can also be gauged from its outcome, as the whole region has become a hub of crises rather than stability.

Furthermore, the Obama administration seems to have no clear-cut regional objectives. In Iraq, the US has been supporting the Iraqi government to crush Sunni rebels, whereas in Syria it has been aiding Sunni rebels in their fight against the Syrian State. Just quoting one example, for fighting against ISIS in Iraq, the US provides airstrikes to the ground forces of Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp's Quds Force (IRGC-QF). It may be worth mentioning that Suleimani is the Iranian General and mastermind who reshaped the Syrian war by forging an Iranian-Russian alliance in support of Assad.<sup>32</sup> On the other side of the border in Iraq, while conducting bombings against ISIS and Al-Qaeda, the US has assured Iran that Assad would not be targeted. In short, Assad enjoys the US security guarantee. Further, the US is working in tandem, not only with forces sympathetic to Iran but with forces actively funded and directed from Tehran.<sup>33</sup> In this pandemonium, rebels in both the countries are the only beneficiaries irrespective of their affiliation i.e. ISIS, Al-Qaeda or local militant groups.

Thirdly, US foreign policy toward Russia has also not been consistent since the end of the Cold War. The analysis of a riveting narrative about Russo-US relations since the Soviet collapse, through the

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<sup>31</sup> "Obama openly admits 'brokering power transition' in Ukraine," *RT*, February 1, 2015, <<https://www.rt.com/op-edge/228379-obama-power-transition-ukraine/>>, (accessed October 31, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow," *REUTERS*, October 6, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Kyle Orton and James Snell, "In Syria, Russia and Iran reap the harvest of Obama's failed foreign policy," *National Review*, October 1, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/424873/syria-russia-and-iran-reap-harvest-obamas-failed-foreign-policy-kyle-orton-james>.

Ukraine crisis, exposes many challenges in their bilateral ties. American presidents have repeatedly attempted to build a strong partnership with Russia on two accounts: (1) to shed the Cold War legacy of deep mistrust; and, (2) to acknowledge the significance of Russia because of its nuclear arsenal, its strategic location bordering Europe and Asia, and its ability to support or thwart American interests.

In the 1990s, Bush, following Nixonian Realism, encouraged Russia's integration into the West as he was preoccupied with sustaining global stability.<sup>34</sup> Bill Clinton, inspired by Wilsonian Realism – which signifies a commitment to Wilson's so-called liberal internationalist vision, albeit with coercive 'neo-imperialist' unilateral teeth<sup>35</sup> – assumed that a democratic regime change in Russia would lead to a new strategic partnership, allowing for lower US defence budgets.<sup>36</sup> When George W. Bush came to power, Russia initially never figured in the US policy. The tragic incidents of 9/11, however, brought them both close to each other but it proved to be only a short honeymoon, as a series of conflicting issues and different strategic interests marred their relations. Ever since Obama came into power, the US started following an over-ambitious Russian agenda of developing a pragmatic partnership on common issues like arms control, energy security, and terrorism.

Historic accounts of the past three decades reveal that none of the above policies proved successful. The major hindrance in their interstate relations remains to be the trust deficit, which could not be overcome by any of the leaders.

Angela Stent, an adviser on Russia under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, argues in her book *Limits of Partnership* that the heart of the problem is the asymmetry in the two countries' economic and military strength, and the distance between their views of international realities; she states that their relationship will remain a limited and troubled one as long as these obstacles are left in place.<sup>37</sup>

## **Decline in US Relative Power**

Since the end of World War I, the US has emerged as the most dominant player in geopolitics. During World War II and the Cold War, the US maintained its supremacy. And, with the death of Communism in 1991, it has been enjoying the status of a sole superpower.

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<sup>34</sup> P. Rutland and G. Dubinsky, "US foreign policy in Russia." in *US Foreign Policy*, eds. M. Cox, and D. Stokes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008),259.

<sup>35</sup> John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 258.

<sup>36</sup> A.E. Stent, "America and Russia: Paradoxes of Partnership." in *Russia's Engagement with the West: Transformation and Integration in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. A. Motyl, et.al., (Armonk, N.Y. : M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 263.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Legvold, "Review of, 'The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-first Century'." *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2014.

In the post-Cold War era, US superiority has seen a consistent downfall. Soon after the US emerged victorious in the Gulf War (1990-91), its global position began losing strength. The subsequent two wars – Afghanistan, 2001 and Iraq, 2003 – also served as catalysts to the process. Obama, nonetheless, could partially succeed in damage-control. His regime has become a period of US global retrenchment, with more attention paid to the home base.<sup>38</sup>

Historically, the most common reason for huge defence spending by any great power has always been to influence the foreign policy behaviour of other nations. The US, though, still possesses the world's largest economy and most powerful military, but is it capable of moulding other states' behaviour? Certainly not, it cannot wage wars either against Russia over Ukraine or against China in the South China Sea. Even Iran and North Korea have well calculated that the US is not in a position to roll back their nuclear programme. As Chairman Mao long ago had characterized America as a "paper tiger,"<sup>39</sup> the prevailing global scenario, especially the Ukrainian and Syrian crises, prove worthy of Mao's assessment.

## Rise of the Rest

The history of world politics is quite fluid in nature. Many international actors of one era figure nowhere in a succeeding world order. The great powers of post-Westphalian times – Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany – lost their status in the bipolar world. Similarly, the USSR ceased to exist in the prevailing unipolar international order.

The relative increase and decrease in the states' positions on the global canvas is a natural phenomenon. The post-Cold War accounts of global history reveal that a number of new actors have emerged in the world theatre. Notwithstanding the United States' absolute superiority in military and economic strength, the growth of the rest has created a shift in the global unipolarity. This rise merits evaluation from two dimensions, military and economic.

The military power of a country can best be judged from its military expenditures. A comparison of the defence budgets of selected international actors can help in assessing the growing military culture in states and their relative positions in the international order.

In 1990, the US spent approximately \$500 billion, whereas its spending in 2014 was recorded at over \$600 billion. Though its current military budget is the world's largest (over 33 percent of the world total), yet on a comparative basis, the US has not shown much progress as

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<sup>38</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Return of Great Power Rivalry* (Moscow, Carnegie, 2014), 12.

<sup>39</sup> Jing Li, *China's America: The Chinese View the United States, 1999-2000* (New York, University of New York, 2011), 119.

compared to other nations. US military spending in 2014 showed an increase of 20 percent as compared to the pre-Cold War period, whereas other nations have made huge investments in their military spending. Just to quote a few, China's spending in 1990 was less than \$20 billion, as compared to over \$200 billion today, showing a record increase of approximately 900 percent. Similarly, Russia by the year 2000 had been spending roughly \$30 billion, whereas its current spending is over \$80 billion (nearly a 200 per cent increase). In other nations, the Indian military budget has increased by over 150 percent than what it was in 1990; that of Iran and Saudi Arabia over 200 percent each; and that of France, UK, and Germany by over 50 percent. Pakistan's military budget in the 1990s used to be roughly \$4-4.5 billion, which now ranges from \$8-8.5 billion (a 100 percent increase). These statistics reflect changing trends in military spending that have a significant impact on states' behaviour in the international system.<sup>40</sup> The above statistics suggest that, though America still holds the absolute military power, yet its gap with other nations is systematically decreasing.

From an economic perspective, the databases of various institutions, like the IMF and the World Bank as well private organizations, can best serve the 'rise of the rest' phenomenon. The US GDP from 1990 to date has increased from \$6 trillion to over \$17 trillion, showing an increase of approximately 200 percent. Contrarily, China has shown an increase from barely \$0.4 trillion to \$10 trillion (over 2,500 percent) in the same period. Brazil expanded from \$0.5 trillion to \$2.3 trillion (400 per cent); India, from just \$0.3 trillion to \$2 trillion (over 500 percent); and Russia, from \$0.5 trillion in 1990, has risen to \$2 trillion today, with a jump of over 250 percent.<sup>41</sup>

The relative economic developments in various regions, coupled with the global recession of 2008, had an adverse effect on the US economic ranking. This also made the global balance shift in favour of non-Western societies. China, India, Brazil, Turkey, Mexico, South Africa, and Indonesia have all surged ahead, with a number of other emerging market economies following them. The G-20 group, born out of the global crisis, has begun to appear more important than the G-8 (or the G-7).<sup>42</sup>

## **Renaissance of Realism**

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the pundits of Liberal theory in International Relations proclaimed their triumph and denounced that Realism had gone the way of the dinosaurs. Francis Fukuyama – the

<sup>40</sup> SIPRI, "Military Expenditure Database," <[http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex\\_database](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database)> (accessed November 3, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> The World Bank, "Gross Domestic Product 2014", Databank, The World Bank, <<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/>>, (accessed November 1, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Return of Great Power Rivalry* (Moscow, Carnegie, 2014), 13.

torchbearer of neo-liberalism - symbolized the fall of the world's largest Communist empire with "the end of history"<sup>43</sup> and claimed that with the breakup of the Soviet Union, "there is no struggle or conflict over 'large' issue, and consequently no need for generals and statesmen; what remains is primarily economic activity." Fukuyama's claim lived for a very short period of time. While the liberalists were still rejoicing in their triumph, Huntington came out with his "Clash of Civilizations" theory, marking the re-entry of neo-realists in the world theatre. The drastic episode of September 11, 2001, further undermined the liberal ideology among practitioners of international relations.

As per Mearsheimer's arguments, the post-Cold War era did not bring any change to the basic architecture of the world order and states' behaviour.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Morgenthau believes that due to the prevailing environment of security competition, the possibility of wars among international actors cannot be ruled out. He supplements his argument by saying that "states are hardwired with an insatiable lust for power so as to secure their national interests."<sup>45</sup> Russia's power plays in Ukraine and Syria – besides illustrating that a state's "zero-sum" quality of securing only its national interests and proving that "the end of history" theory is no more relevant – has marked a renaissance of Realism in the prevalent anarchic international structure.

## Conclusion

No world order has survived forever. Change being a permanent feature of the international system, the shift in the existing unipolar moment is a natural phenomenon. It took three centuries for the world system to transit from multipolarity to bipolarity in 1945. The bipolar system prevailed for almost half of the century and was followed by unipolarity in 1991. The life cycle of the unipolar moment seemed to be the shortest one as it has started changing its colours in just a quarter of a century's time.

American geopolitical supremacy commenced with their entry in World War I. After power sharing with the former Soviet Union during the Cold War era, the US became the sole superpower in 1991. Notwithstanding, its numerical superiority in military and economic strength, the question of its dominance has seriously been weighed in academic circles. Under the quasi-mathematical equation of a state's power, given by David Singer, political scientists today raise serious questions about America's capabilities. Far from countering Russia's

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<sup>43</sup> Frances Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Simon and Schuster, 2006), 31.

<sup>44</sup> Michal Brecher & Frank P. Harvey ed(s), *Realism and Institutionalism in International Relations* (Michigan, University of Michigan, 2002), 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



power play either in Ukraine or Syria, the sole superpower seems to be helpless in moulding the behaviour of either Iran or North Korea.

The prevailing geostrategic environment suggests apparent changes in the global political dynamics. The resurgence of Russia as the main challenger to the United States' relative superiority is just one facet of the change. There are, however, quite visible cracks in the American self-proclaimed myth of exceptionalism. The flawed policies, both in Ukraine and Syria, have only contributed towards instability in the regions and benefitted anti-US forces. There is also no second opinion on the emergence (and re-emergence) of new actors on the global political landscape. The growing culture of huge military spending and relative economic developments in various regions has blemished the US absolute superiority. Above all, with the renaissance of Realism, Fukuyama's "end of history" theory has met its fate. In the existing fluid scenario; the emergence of a new world order is, now, just a matter of time.

