



How Many Enemies Does America Want?

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The exciting days of America as the unipower, the essential nation, the hyperpower, the sole superpower, the embodiment of worldly glory and virtue, are long over. That heady moment, evident to all after the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union, ended with the Bush administration. George H.W. Bush's 1992 election defeat indicated that the American people had quickly lost their enthusiasm for imperial overreach.

The surprise new president, Bill Clinton, was confident and ambitious, but found that battling warlords and creating nations was not for the faint-hearted. Only a few months into his tenure came the infamous "Black Hawk down" incident. The score: Somalia 1, America 0. Clinton withdrew U.S. forces, ending any fantasy that Bush's "what we say goes" was reality outside of rarefied diplomatic forums.

Not that Clinton's foreign policy crew got the message. The administration applied starvation as policy against Iraq's Saddam Hussein, whom Washington had befriended after his invasion of Iran. Clinton's ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, explained "We think the price is worth it" when questioned about the reported deaths of a half million Iraqi children. Lamenting his failure to amass a more consequential presidential record by fighting a real war or two, Clinton was left with intermittent bombing of Iraq, which achieved nothing of note, and a brief Balkan campaign that always and everywhere disposed ethnic Serbs while ignoring war crimes committed by everyone else.

Following Clinton came George W. Bush, who ran for office urging a different, "humble" foreign policy but as president implemented an arrogant and extraordinarily misguided strategy. Of course, it was 9/11, killing some 3000 Americans, that turned Bush into a wannabe master of the universe. Alas, he lacked the knowledge, humility, vision, and competence to succeed, leaving the Middle East and Central Asia aflame.

Two decades and three presidents later, American troops only now are leaving Afghanistan, likely to be again ruled by the Taliban, which was in charge when "Dubya" Bush first intervened.

The Iraq invasion was worse, a true humanitarian catastrophe – killing thousands of Americans, injuring tens of thousands more, killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, displacing millions more, and ravaging both Iraq and the entire region. That conflict's consequences live on with a greatly destabilized Mideast and strengthened Iran.

Failure has not, alas, tempered the ambitions of American policymakers who spend much of their free time creating more enemies while building castles in the sky. Many Washington geopolitical projects are now national wrecks, such as Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen, in which the US uses sanctions and proxies to impoverish and kill the most vulnerable peoples in the name of a greater good. Current policymakers, like Albright & Co. before, have decided that the price paid by others "is worth it." It always seems to be "worth it," no matter how disastrous the consequences.

More serious is the strange bipartisan insistence on treating both Russia and China as enemies at the same time. No surprise, they have snuggled closer in response. Which has led to much whining by the usual foreign policy suspects, angry that Moscow and Beijing are working together to defy America. The chutzpah! Don't they understand that the US is the chosen one? Who would have imagined the injustice?

To the good, Moscow's and Beijing's relationship falls short of a military alliance. Neither wants war with the US. However, Washington policymakers do not win points for sagacity. Even loosely connecting the world's number two and three military powers makes both better able to withstand pressure from the world number one.

China and Russia could simultaneously use force against US friends and allies. The possibility of coordinated aggression increases the range of contingencies for which Washington must prepare. More common, and thus of even greater consequence today, the two states cooperate economically and politically. Both usually support the other even if uncomfortable with specific behavior, such as China with Russia's territorial grabs.

Moreover, fear of offending two great powers increases the reluctance of friendly governments to back US initiatives. For instance, commercially, at least, Germany is close to both Russia and China. Pressing Berlin to choose between America and one of them is a huge ask. Expecting Germany to dump both seeks a miracle.

One response for Washington is to proceed oblivious to the world, presuming that America remains the undisputed global hegemon and therefore that its commands will continue to be obeyed. However, even allies long have resisted US dictates. During the 1980s as the Cold War raged Europeans aided Nicaragua's Sandinistas and built a natural gas pipeline to the Soviet Union. In 2003 most of Europe rejected the Bush administration's irresponsible Iraq invasion. No European states followed the Trump White House in leaving the Iranian nuclear accord and many balked at America's hardline position toward China.

Another option for Washington is to respond to resistance by more intensely browbeating its friends. However, resentment, even hostility, is likely to result, as was evident when the US sanctioned European firms involved in the Nord Stream 2 Russo-German natural gas pipeline. Also pushing US allies and adversaries together were sanctions on Iran. European governments developed the INSTEX mechanism to allow trade with Iran.

Adopting more realistic goals toward the PRC and Russia would be the more logical response, but, alas, has virtually no support in Washington. Powerful ideological and political incentives

encourage policymakers to adopt maximalist positions toward both China and Russia. And successive US administrations have insisted that allies do as instructed.

Of course, Russia and China are both malign powers, authoritarian, even verging on totalitarian, in the case of the latter. However, their threat to America is wildly overstated. Washington's determination to prevail seems to fulfill a lingering sense of "manifest destiny" that has never disappeared from the American psyche.

Finally, Washington could revive the "Nixon-to-China" strategy, targeting either Russia or China with a charm offensive of sorts. The goal would be to separate the two governments. The US and either China or Russia wouldn't need to become buddies – it took the death of Mao Zedong before Washington and Beijing enjoyed relations that approached friendly. Benevolent neutrality would be enough to help rebalance power relationships. As in most international relationships, success would by no means be assured. However, the obvious benefits that would follow warming ties warrant making the effort – to Moscow, virtually everyone assumes, since it poses the lesser challenge.

However, advocates of a double cold war, with both China and Russia treated as enemies, dismiss the argument that Washington should work to break the Sino-Russian embrace. They reach that result with equal certainty but for contradictory reasons. For instance, John Herbst of the Atlantic Council argued that "observers have missed the limitations to this entente and the first signs of problems to come." He predicted that "this bilateral relationship will return to its historical norm" of rivalry, though he does not see the breakup as imminent, even though inevitable. So he believes there is no need to make concessions to the hated Vladimir Putin.

Taking a very different stance is Michael McFaul, a former ambassador to Russia now at Stanford University. Advocates of dividing the two autocracies "forget the essential precondition for its success: the Sino-Soviet split," he argued. Far from being certain to drift apart, as Herbst believes, McFaul assumes the two governments will remain partners. Why, he asked: "would Putin abandon his autocratic soul mate?" McFaul would look to Russia for a new relationship when it is a democracy – apparently whether years, decades, or centuries from now – not before.

Yet both arguments are wrong to the extent that they presume whatever is must forever be. Rarely in foreign affairs are events fixed. Indeed, they are seldom certain a week or month let alone years ahead. Herbst is right about the long Russo-Chinese rivalry. However, Washington's exceedingly hostile behavior toward Moscow has overwhelmed China's and Russia's natural differences. Which gives McFaul's contention some credence: Putin naturally prefers the present company of Xi Jinping to Joe Biden.

This balance is inherently unstable, however. As Georgetown's Charles Kupchan noted, "If Russia is to be drawn westward, it will result not from Washington's overtures or altruism but from the Kremlin's cold reassessment of how best to pursue its long-term self-interest." However, it isn't enough to tell Moscow why it is better off hanging with Washington – as Kupchan put it, "by demonstrating that more cooperation with the West can help Russia redress the mounting vulnerabilities arising from its close partnership with China."

Rather, the US should stop pushing Moscow toward Beijing. That requires more than lecturing Putin to make better choices in friends. It means treating Russia better. Less hostility over natural rivalries – such as in Syria, a Moscow ally for decades – would help. So would halting NATO

expansion, especially to Georgia and Ukraine, which actually makes the US less secure. Washington also should seek a modus vivendi over the latter that would satisfy Russian security concerns while ending Moscow's efforts to destabilize Kiev. Finally, the allies should recognize and accept differences over Crimea's status, so the issue does not permanently poison the relationship.

Again, Washington's objectives should be modest. As Daniel DePetris of Defense Priorities noted, "It is unrealistic to enlist Russia in a U.S.-led bloc against China, particularly with U.S.-Russia relations at a post-Cold War low." However, pulling Moscow out of an anti-American block would be gain enough.

The American imperium imagined by so many Washington policymakers ended almost before it began. It is dead now. Instead of creating endless enemies, the US should reduce the number and intensity of its adversaries. Russia would be a good place to start. China is enough of a challenge without needlessly turning Moscow and Beijing into allies.

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