

Coping with China, Russia, and the Middle East

The process, poorly disguised and feebly denied by the administration, of the withdrawal of the United States from the world's main overseas theaters continues. And in general, in the regions where American withdrawal has had the greatest strategic impact, the withdrawal is being managed competently by the regional powers the United States previously, and for many decades, considered it in its national interest to reinforce. In the Far East, China, still in a mighty triumph of developmental economics, though it is tapering off, has essentially adopted the foreign policy of the traditional emerging power, the slightly adolescent bravura and braggadocio of Andrew Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt, and even, though without his criminally negligent insouciance, of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Absurdly chauvinistic claims are being made about insignificant places like the Spratly Islands, and international seas and sea passages are being declared Chinese coastal waters, almost with the comical bellicosity, though not the outright buffoonery, of Mussolini claiming in the 1930s that the Mediterranean was "an Italian lake."

The U.S. Seventh Fleet still sails from Japan, but the Indians and Japanese especially are raising their naval capabilities, and there is no disposition to be more or less than respectful of China's contiguity. Despite Japan's aging population, and the failure of successive economic programs to jolt the country out of the stasis that followed the abrupt collapse of Japan's great economic challenge to the United States in the mid Nineties, it is a great economic power and is rearming. India is accelerating along the development track out of an over-controlled, stultified, dysfunctional economy under a government with a clear mandate to generate swift economic growth equitably distributed. The South Koreans, Vietnamese,

Filipinos, Indonesians, Thais – from all of whom China, in the powerful phases of previous dynasties, expected deference if not tribute – as well, of course, as the Australians and New Zealanders, are steadily cohering to contest China's self-assertions. In the long-hermit state of Myanmar (Burma), as in Taiwan (Nationalist China, as the Vatican still redoubtably recognizes it to be because of Beijing's oppression of Christianity), there is studious autonomy from the People's Republic, one of the few policies on which the Burmese reformers and the heavy-handed military despotism agree.

For all its success at departing the Third World, China has been irresponsibly indulgent of rogue states, including Iran and North Korea, and appears to be somewhat outmaneuvered by the demented nepotocracy in North Korea, which has become a quasi-nuclear power under Beijing's nose – apparently because, if China really turned the screws on North Korea, which is almost entirely dependent on the People's Republic and could be brought to heel easily (sparing the world all the fruitless negotiations with the Kim regime of the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations), the fragile and freakish leftover from World War II would crumble and collapse at the feet of South Korea, almost instantly transforming a united Korea into one of the world's powers.

China has itself to blame for this conundrum, and it must minister to its steadily more complicated relations with its neighbors while its still largely command economy is forced to pitch to a domestic consumer market that is far from docile. The domestic savings rate is nearly 50 percent because the regime has provided only a minimal social-security safety net, and China faces the task of luring hundreds of millions of people to be consumers, to ensure continued economic growth, with political institutions that are mysterious, largely corrupt, completely unanswerable to the public, and responsive only to invisible pressures within the seething power structure of the governing Communist party (of a largely

capitalist country). The Obama “pivot to Asia” was really just an excuse to explain withdrawal from Europe and the Middle East westward; those areas were not supposed to notice that the forces withdrawn went home and that the only expeditionary forces that made the full pivot were a few companies of Marines sent to enjoy the casino and the zoo at Darwin, Australia, which has not been under threat since a Japanese air raid in 1942, shortly after General Douglas MacArthur disembarked, announcing his return (to the Philippines).

Europe is not threatened by Russia, and the British and French possess enough nuclear force to prevent nuclear blackmail on their own. But with the weak leadership in London and Paris complementing the abdication in Washington, and German chancellor Angela Merkel hobbled by a schizoid coalition partner (the SPD, torn and waffling between Alliance and pacifist factions), there is some danger of further exposure of the erosion of the political will of the West. Germany is the greatest power in Europe and has been since Bismarck united it in 1871, but has not behaved like both a great and a responsible power since Wilhelm II dismissed Bismarck in 1890. (Wilhelm’s and Hitler’s Germany was a great but irresponsible power, and Stresemann’s Weimar and the Federal Republic from Adenauer to Merkel have been responsible but diminutive, compared with the real strength of Germany.)

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union, there are three contending concepts for the future of its territories. First, there is Putin’s attempted reabsorption of ethnic-Russian irredentists in the former Soviet republics, as in Crimea, Donetsk, and the contested Georgian territories. Second, there is the Finlandization of the former European Soviet republics – Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – as a neutral zone subject to Russian influence but not domination, as in inter-war and post-war Finland. And the third option is a partition of those areas between people who prefer to be Russian and the rest who

prefer to be in the West, preferably in the European Union and NATO, if that alliance retains any meaning (a question that has arisen from the negligence of the last two U.S. administrations). Unfortunately, there is no evidence that any person in authority in the so-called chancelleries of the West is thinking of this problem in these terms. They're just muddling along. The best course would be to give Putin a quarter of a loaf and let those ethnic Russians in the formerly affiliated states who are local majorities, and wish to remain Russian citizens, do so, and to invite all the rest into the West, as the EU stabilizes itself and Obama's successor breathes new life into NATO before the most successful alliance in history becomes a husk.

The enfeeblement of the West must be considered aberrant; these societies cannot have simply atrophied in the years since Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl, and Mitterrand, even less since Clinton, Blair, and Chirac, whose governments could at least, and did generally, act sensibly. The real objective must be to complete the demolition of czarist and Stalinist Russian imperialism while recognizing the integrity and distinction of the Russian nationality in a way that liberates those who seek liberation without humiliating Russia. And the big prize is to extend the Western world, whose eastern border was only 100 miles beyond the Rhine when Germany was divided, to the borders of Russia, the better to assist, absolutely peacefully and by example, persuasion, and the ravages of prosperity, the Western emulators in Russia to prevail over the nativists, and to bring Russia, Eurasia, into the West on good terms and as a distinguished partner. This is the real prize, but it is totally obscured by the unfathomable mediocrity of the current cast of characters, and the danger is that Putin will exploit the feeble West and start stirring up Russians in the little Baltic states. No NATO member except Poland is going to consider such a thing, in the NATO Treaty terms, as "an attack upon one is an attack upon all" call to arms. If we get through to the next U.S. presidential-inauguration day without

such a test, it will only be because of the munificence of the Saudis in holding oil prices down so Putin can't even afford a show of strength against the Lithuanians.

The Middle East has witnessed the most complicated withdrawal of all. Obama's response to the Israeli elections, in which he meddled shamelessly and unsuccessfully, was an outrage: spontaneous complaints from his press secretary that Netanyahu was dividing his own Jewish and Arab citizens. This is a bit rich from the spokesman for a president who has intervened prejudicially and divisively in almost every highly publicized racial incident in the U.S. in his time in office, accused the Republicans of waging "a war on women," and fiscally assaulted the Roman Catholic Church. And it is cheeky to address such comments to democratic Israel, where dissident Arabs are the third party in the parliament. Benjamin Netanyahu has a mandate to attack Iran's nuclear capability if he thinks it necessary to Israeli national security and would be supported by the Saudis, and tacitly by the Egyptians and the Turks. It would be better for the United States and the other five countries in the negotiations to abandon their inept meddling and let Israel get on with it, or use that prospect to extract a better agreement from Iran, and for the Saudis and Gulf states to finance the admirable Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in modernizing the Egyptian economy if the U.S. continues to sulk over the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood (of all unworthy subjects of American sympathy). The Palestinians can have their state, with a narrower West Bank and a deeper Gaza, if they recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state and cease to be a launch-pad for terrorist and rocket attacks on Israel. The ancient Persians, Egyptians, Turks, Jews, and Saudis will work it out in their own way and time, as long as nuclear weapons aren't in the equation, with special status for Jordan, Lebanon, and the Kurds.

American withdrawal isn't a bad idea, as long as it isn't necessarily permanent. What has been this administration's

single most irritating characteristic has been retreating from the world while pretending it isn't, and claiming a completely undiminished right to advise and coerce those countries to whom it has almost ceased to be relevant. Obama has neither the will to stay nor the grace to go.

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