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The US in Eurasia: New Challenges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the US the sole indisputable world power with almost unlimited resources. However, over the past decade, it has become clear that US resources are not limitless. The Eurasian landmass now contains many competitors with strategies opposed to those of Washington. In a sense, the monolithic Soviet Union was easier to contain than the simultaneous challenges of a rising China, a revanchist Russia, and an ambitious Iran. There are further serious problems to be dealt with, such as terrorism and cyber security. Containment of post-Cold War Eurasia will be no easy task for the US.

From WWII through the breakup of the Soviet Union, the US shared world dominance with its major competitor in Moscow. Despite the numerous local conflicts that took place during those 40 or so years, the two powers' relatively equal strength gave the world geopolitical stability. Washington spent enormous amounts in terms of both finances and military strength to contain the Sino-Soviet bloc, as much of Eurasia was under communist control.

The fundamental principle of American strategy at that time was military and economic containment. Washington was unable to defeat the Soviet Union militarily, and that fact compelled the Americans to develop a new strategy to check it. Thence came the spread of US influence to parts of Europe, Iran, and the Asia-Pacific. The Soviet strategy was to outmaneuver US containment by instigating insurgencies in the US neighborhood.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, there was a widespread perception that the US had become so powerful that it could scarcely be challenged by any other power. It is certainly true that as of 1991, for the first time in history, there was a sole power holding essentially unlimited global military as well as economic reach. Neither the Roman Empire in antiquity nor the British Empire

in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century held what the US possessed in terms of capability.

However, this had largely changed by the second decade of the twenty-first century. The US remains enormously powerful and is able to wage wars on several fronts simultaneously, but that is not the same as its previous omnipotence. Politicians as well as analysts sometimes believe that US power has no limits. There are always limits, and a global state like the US can only remain powerful by knowing and respecting them.

The primary limit constraining America is the same as that which affected the Roman and British empires: demography. In Eurasia – Asia and Europe together – the Americans are outnumbered. The US military is built around force multipliers: weapons that can destroy the enemy before the enemy destroys the relatively small force the US has deployed. This strategy can be effective – but there are so many potential US enemies that US striking forces could easily be undermined, creating a state of attrition.

Thus the deployment of a major US force in Eurasia is unsupportable except in special cases where overwhelming power is necessary to win a major battle (the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan come to mind).

However, the Eurasian landmass is also experiencing deep geopolitical changes. On the surface, one might say it is easier for the US to manage a divided Eurasia now that there are numerous regional powers competing with one other rather than the monolith that characterized the more stable era of the Cold War.

Modern-day Eurasia is indeed more chaotic, and this unpredictability represents a marked break with what the US had to cope with in previous decades. In the more predictable Cold War era, geopolitics was important, but it was hidden under democratic and idealistic premises.

In modern Eurasia, though, there is a clear shift towards a new, more untenable world order. Take, for example, the new US national security document signed by President Trump. It has formally ushered in the end of ethical and moral premises in international relations and heralded the return of geopolitics – a step rooted in the experience of past generations.

This thinking is well summarized in the following quote from the document, which notes the increased unpredictability and competition among various powers in Eurasia:

“These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades, policies based on the assumption that

engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.”

The more chaotic Eurasia becomes, the more difficult it will be for the US to contain. If the US once faced only a powerful Soviet Union, it now faces Russia, China, Iran, and a destabilized Middle East.

Moreover, terrorism as well as cyber security issues are heaped on US foreign policy makers, forcing them to rebalance US strategy. Numerous indications in US foreign policy towards Ukraine, Georgia, Israel, and Japan in the Asia-Pacific show that Washington now understands more and more that it can no longer afford to be directly involved in a host of conflicts across the world, or specifically in Eurasia. It would be quickly exhausted. The US is thus inclined towards slowly creating more regional and global balances based on broad financial and military support, whether to Ukraine and Georgia in the former Soviet space against Russia, or to Israel and others in the Middle East against Iran.

Beyond the immediate Russian security threat to eastern Europe, China and Iran aspire to change the existing political balance of power in their immediate neighborhoods. China’s economic rise, coupled with its military development, has poised it to become a powerful world player in international politics. More importantly, its strategic imperatives clash with those of the US. Beijing needs to secure its procuring of vital oil and gas resources, which are currently available mostly through the Malakka Strait. In the age of US naval dominance, the Chinese imperative is to redirect its economy’s dependence as well as shift supply routes elsewhere from the Malakka Strait. This is the reasoning behind the almost trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, which is intended to reconnect the Asia-Pacific with Europe through Russia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. At the same time, Chinese naval ambitions are on the rise to thwart US dominance close to its shores.

Since domination of the oceans is at the heart of US global power and the Chinese economy is insecure, mutual suspicions between Beijing and Washington are bound to increase over the next years and decades.

In the long run, this is more dangerous for the US than was the Soviet threat during the Cold War. The Soviets were competing militarily. Today, China is economically predominant.

Also problematic is Iran’s rise over recent years. The country’s geographical position, as well as the wars in Iraq and Syria, transformed Iran into a full-scale regional power with a reach to the Mediterranean. There are signs that this is

not a short-term development. The Iranians are prodigiously working on extending their military influence backed up with economic incentives.

The potential of US global power is a large subject, but one thing is clear: in the coming years we will likely see America become less directly involved in various theaters across Eurasia. At the same time, in striking comparison with the Soviet period when there was only one kind of enemy, the US now faces a plethora of threats to its world order from a number of competitors. China is economically and militarily powerful; Iran aspires to build a commonwealth; the Russians are challenging the Europeans. Washington cannot develop a single strategy that will neutralize different kinds of geopolitical competitors. Instead, the US will rely more on local actors to keep China, Iran, and Russia at bay.

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