

"THE UNIPOLAR MOMENT" TO "RADICAL UNCERTAINTY"?

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It is exactly twenty-five years this year, since the Soviet Union, a nuclear superpower, ceased to exist – a dramatic moment in history, which Vladimir Putin called "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century". Whether it was "the biggest", especially, compared to the WW1, which destroyed five empires, remains debatable but a "catastrophe" for hundreds of millions of people on most of the Euroasian continent for sure.

At the time when the world is helplessly witnessing tragedy in Syria, rise of radical religious fundamentalism and terrorism, inequality, global migration crisis, continuous economic malaise, skilfully branded "the new norm", and a "thrilling" electoral campaign in the US, many begin wondering how we got here.

After decades of Cold War between the two superpowers, by mid 1980s the USA and the USSR launched a de-escalation policy. The process of rapprochement between the West and the East created such a euphoria that the Soviet leader Gorbachev came up with a proposal of building a "common European home", which de-facto became the beginning of dismantling of the Warsaw Pact, and eventually, led to collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

But while the USSR was still around, and politicians, scholars and experts on both sides of the divide were discussing the transformation of the old bipolar world into the new multipolar one, in September 1990 a gentleman named Charles Krauthammer wrote in Foreign Affairs magazine the following: "...it has been assumed that the old bipolar world would beget a multipolar world with power dispersed to new centers in Japan, Germany (and/or "Europe"), China and a diminished Soviet Union/Russia.....the immediate post-Cold War world is not multipolar. It is unipolar. The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies".¹

The title of that piece was "The Unipolar Moment". Prophetically or accidentally, Krauthammer predicted the future better than many others: "...we are in for abnormal times. Our best hope for safety in such times, as in difficult times past, is in American strength and will-the strength and

¹ Krauthammer, C. The Unipolar Moment. Retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1991-02-01/unipolar-moment>

will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them"².

Looking back, the quarter of a century which past, was indeed, in many ways "abnormal", both in its positive and negative manifestations.

During the last decade of the twentieth and early twenty-first century, the world lived through the period of unprecedented economic expansion, financial and trade liberalization, which benefited the collective West in the first place, but also the developing world led by regional giants like China and Brazil. Never before the developed and developing worlds were growing simultaneously at such a pace and in such a magnitude.

This period probably was the "golden age" for Europe, which never before attained such a unity, prosperity and peace, which looked at times "abnormal" for the continent, which was the main battle field of two world wars and a long Cold War.

While Europe was expanding to the East enjoying and profiting from the moment, Russia and former Soviet territories lived through unprecedented economic and social collapse, multiple armed conflicts from Tajikistan to Moldova, a tragedy where millions have perished.

At the same time, in other parts of the planet, new world order "unashamedly laid down" by the United States in the form of neoliberal economic globalization was not altogether negative, and even on the contrary. China and many other developing nations in Asia and Latin America lived through unprecedented times of their own, achieving spectacular growth in terms of wealth, human, industrial and social development.

On the political front, new world order manifested itself in the promotion and even enforcement of Western style democratization and liberalization, a one-fits-all principal. In Europe, new order meant unstoppable expansion of NATO to the very Russian border, fully ignoring its security concerns due to perceived insignificance of the latter. In Latin America, Africa and Asia it brought a gradual end to military juntas, which was not a bad result altogether.

By the end of 1990s the journey the world embarked upon, indeed, at times could produce the feeling of "the end of history".....until 9/11 happened – a turning point, which clearly signalled that not everyone agrees with the new rules of the "unipolar moment".

² Krauthammer, C. The Unipolar Moment. Retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1991-02-01/unipolar-moment>

In response, the US and the collective West, demonstrated their preparedness to brutally enforce the new rules by all means and at any price. The list of "successes" is long and well known. One of the first and most memorable results of enforced democratization, aside from campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, was open victory of Hamas in Gaza.

But even despite such "successes", the overall stability and direction of the new order looked pretty solid...until the subprime crisis of 2008 erupted at the very centre of the unipolar system, shaking it to the very core.

The crisis and its consequences, which the world still living through, uncovered all the deficiencies, cracks and weaknesses of the model which was relentlessly built ever since the end of the Cold War - it turned out that in the shadow of global economic expansion, severe disbalances of similar magnitude were building-up for decades. Prosperity and rise in living standards was achieved at the price of accumulation of unprecedented debts of all types. The emergency program implemented by the Federal Reserve and other central banks, without doubt, saved the global economy from collapse and brought temporary relief but the fundamental problems of revival of sustainable demand and reduction of debts were not solved.

Lord Mervyn King, former Chairman of the Bank of England, described the current situation in global economy as "radical uncertainty" with major crisis still ahead.

On the political front, enforced democratization of non-Western traditional societies has led to emergence of multiple jihadist movements and protracted conflicts across the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, migrant crisis and terrorism in Europe and North America, ignoring Russia's security concerns for decades has led to a war in Ukraine, Taleban in Afghanistan is back on the rise and the list goes on.

Multiple international crisis and inability of the superpower to enforce stability over the order it was building since 1991, dangerously points at the limitations of its power at the time when the world has entered a period of great uncertainty and vulnerability.

The International Relations theory—especially neorealism—predicts that the unbalanced power of a unipolar international system should catalyse the emergence of new great powers and a quick return to balance-of-power politics, in order to limit the power of the preeminent state and restore the system to its "natural" state of multipolarity.³

³ N.A. Sears *China, Russia and the Long "Unipolar Moment"* The Diplomat April 27, 2016 <http://thediplomat.com/2016/04/china-russia-and-the-unipolar-moment/>

Maybe the theory is correct, and in many ways we are already witnessing the emergence of such new powers willing and prepared to challenge the preeminent state.

Prophetically or accidentally, back in 1990 Krauthammer pointed out that the “unipolar moment” would last 20 – 25 years. It seems that it is about time. The unpleasant news though is that every new stable order usually emerges out of great destabilization and chaos, which Mervyn King politely called “radical uncertainty”. If this is the case, then the world better fastens the seat belts – it is going for a ride.