
Russia and the West polar opposites or two sides of the same coin?

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Russia and Chechnya - and Stalin

Chechnya is of course the black spot on Russia's recent record. But it also shows the immense difficulty of defeating insurgencies - a problem that the British also found in Northern Ireland and Aden, the French in North Africa, and the Americans in Vietnam, to give just a few examples. And now, of course, the Americans and British in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Wolf is right to say that the Baltic republics and East European countries are wary of Russia because of history, but there is a vast difference between Russian imperial history and the murderous regime and mass killings of the Stalin period. This might seem like splitting hairs to some, but it is nevertheless a crucial distinction.

Russia's problem is that in addition to its history, it has yet to learn the value of using soft power to its west - which is interesting considering it is more popular in Central Asia, where Imperial Russia's brutal suppression of the 1916 uprising in the region and Stalin's murders are less deeply ingrained in the collective historical memory.

American Empire in Denial vs. Russia Imperialism

Putin's comments could have become the starting point for a more serious debate about global security. In recent years, many commentators have noted that America is the only remaining superpower, some even claiming it is a hyper-power whose dominance over other countries is far greater than that of any other state in history, surpassing even that of the (much longer-lived) Roman Empire.

With America's military budget larger than those of the next 10 countries combined and military bases in over 100 countries, this might seem true at first glance.

But America's decision to expand its military budget yet further after 9/11 is fundamentally flawed. High-tech armed forces manned by soldiers whose lives cannot be risked in the fickle court of public opinion represent a waste of valuable resources because they are ineffective against counter-insurgencies and the kind of threats now posed by non-state actors.

Nor can a military function effectively when the political strategy is so flawed and neo-conservative wishful thinking replaces real expertise and analysis.

Moreover, America's increase in spending in its probably futile attempt to achieve 100% invulnerability is deeply worrying other countries, not just Russia, which fear they could become a target.

There is a risk here that mutual fears could become self-fulfilling and that an arms race could develop.

In his well-known "Melian Dialogue," Thucydides poses the question of whether weak Melos should submit to the stronger Athens. America cannot play the role of Athens, whereby the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must - the stakes nowadays are far too high.

As the world's predominant power, America must attempt to regain its credibility and move beyond an ideological foreign policy to provide leadership. Greater pragmatism, excellent diplomacy over the long haul and new approaches are required to manage new challenges as the world moves ever deeper into uncharted territory.

Western Liberal Democracy - forged in the crucible of war

It is ironic how many liberals and free marketers are blissfully ignorant of the role of war in the emergence of Western liberal democracy. It is a staple of first-year undergraduate history courses that the military revolution caused by advancing technology and changing strategy in medieval and early modern Western Europe necessitated ever larger (standing) armies, which in turn led to increasing centralization and greater tax-raising powers by the state as kings gradually won out over feudal barons.

More recently, few of the rich liberal democracies (and this includes Japan) have reached their present Nirvana without bloody civil wars, fascism or considerable social violence. The main exceptions are the smaller nations of Scandinavia and Switzerland.

Western Exceptionalism makes its democracy difficult to export

At the same time, the West has seen a level of political and economic thinking and contrarian ideas which seem oddly lacking in the intellectual history of Asia and the Arab world.

Political scientists, economists and the Western development community strongly believe in the role of institutions. Get these right, so the argument runs, and everything will be fine. So institutions can be easily transplanted anywhere.

But read the historians bold enough to move outside their narrow academic specializations and write about "the West," and it turns out that most emphasize its uniqueness, both during the classical Greek and Roman periods, and again during the Middle Ages. And this uniqueness is born of a unique combination of geography, environment, history, culture and so on.

The Roman law of continental Europe, for instance, developed organically over centuries, if not millennia, and probably derived its rationality from Greek philosophy in classical Athens. And it was classical Athens that developed a bourgeois democracy - a unique phenomenon apparently without parallel in any non-Western culture.

So while many political scientists and economists have argued that the secret of Western success lies in the Middle Ages or later, there are strong reasons for believing it goes right back to antiquity.

But if this view is correct, it makes it extremely difficult to transfer democracy and the free market outside the West. And indeed, Japan is the only large country outside the West which has managed the jump into the "premier division" in the last 100 years or so.

It is at this level that America and the United Kingdom made a huge mistake in Iraq and with the wider project of "Democracy on the March"

in the Middle East.

Arab society has been tribal since pre-Islamic times, and tribes are hardly conducive to democracy. As some Arab writers and scholars have observed, all Arab countries are collections of tribes masquerading under national flags. The prospects for democracy emerging, let alone flourishing, are not great where the real structures that people relate to are the family, clan and tribe, and then the much broader overarching idea of Islam as a unifying religion and Arabic as a unifying language. There is, it seems, no intermediate entity to command loyalty, a fact which stands in marked contrast to the nation state in the Western European model.

The implications here are twofold.

Putin's argument that democracy cannot be simply transplanted may look self-serving, but it has much history behind it.

The West should recognize this and not expect Russia to become a constitutional state- at least not yet. It remains to be seen whether Russia will follow the usual pattern, whereby increasing personal income will lead to demands for political expression and democracy - assuming there is no major collapse in energy prices.

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The continuation of this article will be posted soon.

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