

Imperial Delusion is the Enemy of Peace and Prosperity

As Russia's war in Ukraine drags into its eighth month, the European Union scrambles for energy to heat its homes and power its industry in the coming winter, the US and China continue to rattle sabers at each other over Taiwan, and smaller actual and potential conflicts rage around the world, it seems like a good time to take stock of two old, busted, worn-out terms: "American hegemony" and "unipolar world."

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly last week, the Russian Federation's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov condemned both: "[A]t some point, having declared victory in the Cold War, Washington elevated itself almost to the position of the messenger of the Lord God on Earth, who has no obligations, but only the 'sacred' right to act with impunity."

Washington, Lavrov declared, is trying to "stop the march of history" against "sovereign states ready to defend their national interests ... resulting in the creation of an equal, socially-oriented, multipolar architecture."

While Lavrov and the government he represents clearly have a hand in the empire business themselves, he's not wrong in pointing out the US regime's hubris, which stretches back to well before the end of the Cold War.

In fact, notions of a "unipolar world" and "American hegemony" were always delusional. While the US came out of World War 2 in better shape than other world powers and ruthlessly exploited its advantageous position to extend political and military tentacles toward every corner of the earth. But it never achieved those two goals despite the expenditure of trillions of dollars and the endings of millions of lives in the pursuit.

With the Russian empire trying in vain to stave off final collapse, the US empire clearly in terminal decline, the EU threatening to come apart at the seams, and any near-future Chinese imperial ambitions likely to fail, the future of humanity might best be served by discarding the notion of empire itself. A 200-year-old poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley points in the right direction:

Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:

“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains.

That’s how all empires end, though usually only after stealing and wasting untold quantities of blood and treasure from both their opponents and their subjects.

Governments — especially states with the ambition to expand their rule across mutually agreed turf lines, which all of them become at some point — are the pedestal upon which empires stand and the component parts of which empires are built. They are not our benefactors. We are their victims.

So long as we continue to tolerate political government, we deny ourselves peace and prosperity.