

The New Twilight Struggle: Freedom and Power in the Post-Cold War Era

By Kim R. Holmes

I have been asked to discuss the political implications of the new world order. This is a challenging task for two reasons. The first is that the political landscape in the world today is so foggy that it is very difficult to see beyond the horizon. No one knows for sure what will happen in Russia, the Balkans, South Africa, China, and many other countries which are facing great decisions in their history. And until we know what will happen in these countries—until history begins to reveal itself in a more coherent way—the future will remain foggy indeed.

The second reason is that there really is no new world order. The end of the East-West conflict has unleashed a seismic shift in the international system that is producing much disorder and chaos. This is truly a period of very rapid change—and in like all such periods, it is difficult to discern trends or to make predictions. But one thing is certain: no major power (including the United States), nor any multinational organization (i.e. the United Nations), nor any single ideology is creating “order” in the world today.

Instead, world politics appears to be having a nervous breakdown. The United States is confused and withdrawn, almost depressed, disappointed and uncertain of its role as the world’s remaining superpower. Russia is in chaos, suffering a severe identity crisis. Europe and Japan are experiencing “post traumatic stress syndrome”—Europe is paralyzed by Bosnia and the stresses posed by the reunification of Europe, while Japan is undergoing a painful process of re-adjustment and reform. And elsewhere around the world, you see what psychologists call the “return of the repressed”—the rebirth of radical nationalism and ethnic hatreds which had been buried by the repression of Communist empires.

While certainly confusing, the international system today is not entirely chaotic or lacking in reason. There are, in fact, underlying trends and ideological themes which characterize this new age of ours. These trends and themes may be like faint figures in a distant fog, but they are beginning to take shape. As such, they may help us to begin defining the fundamental characteristics of the post-Cold War era.

THE RETREAT FROM FREEDOM

The first of these is at once a trend and a theme—a political trend and an ideological theme. It is what I call the retreat from freedom.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the world was seized by a mood of hope. Democracy and markets seemed to have triumphed over their historical foes of dictatorship and communism. Scholars talked of the end of history, while American leaders spoke of promoting democracy around the world as the centerpiece of American foreign and defense policy. The Western values of freedom and democracy seemed to be on the march across the globe—not only in Europe and Eurasia, but as we saw with the North American Free Trade Agreement, in Latin America as well.

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Of course, it was not long before this optimistic mood began to sour. First there was the Persian Gulf war. Then the wars in former Yugoslavia broke out, outraging us with pictures of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Then reform began to go badly in Russia and the former Soviet Union. In addition, the failure of the Clinton Administration's policy of "assertive multilateralism"—that is, attempting to work through the United Nations to establish peace in war torn places like Somalia—marked the end of any hope of creating a new world order.

In the wake of this disappointing turn of events came a loss of confidence in freedom and democracy, particularly in Russia, Eastern Europe, and other places where democratic reforms were supposed to take root after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Western values were no longer on the march, but in retreat.

Indeed, in some parts of the world, there has been a furious and quite conscious rejection of Western liberalism, defined here as the belief in freedom, individualism, a market economy, and representative government—better known as "democracy" (by the way, the purest form of these values can be found in American and British conservatism). The Bosnian Serbs who practiced ethnic cleansing seemed to be atavistic freaks, harking back to a time when fascism and nazism were the main challenges to Western liberalism. So, too, were the mass killings in Rwanda, where thugs hacked away at dead bodies only because they belonged to a different tribe. Radical nationalism and ethnic hatreds are, in fact, rampant throughout the world—from Russia to South Africa, and from Serbia to Tajikistan. You can even see them in the Western world as well—in Germany, for example, where neo-nazis are disturbing the political peace. These nationalists are fast becoming a defining factor in the post-Cold War era.

Nationalism. Nationalism and ethnic separatism, of course, can take many forms. Nationalism can be xenophobic and exclusionary, as in Bosnia, Russia, and other parts of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. But it can also have a human face, appearing to be mere expression of democracy. For example, in her elation over Nelson Mandela's inauguration as president, a South African black woman said recently: "We have always had such low esteem. Now is the time to be... who we are. To tell the truth, that is why our children must go back to our basic culture." After hearing this, another black woman added, "and to maintain our blackness."

In other words, black majoritarian rule in South Africa will finally give blacks the opportunity "to be black." But maintaining "blackness" is not what a multiracial democracy is about. Democracy is about individual human rights and representative government, regardless of race. Democracy is supposed to be color-blind. These women's opinions, which are widely shared by members of the African National Congress, show that while black nationalism in Africa appears to be democratic—in the sense that it is compatible with majoritarian rule—it is not "liberal." No classic liberal doctrine would put race at the center of its definition of democracy.

While nationalism in Africa often is motivated by racial pride and tribal hatreds, nationalism in other parts of the world is not racial or even ethnically based. For example, many of the leaders in the Bosnian war, whether they be Serb or Muslim, are old apparatchiks in the Communist leadership of former Yugoslavia. They are stirring up old religious hatreds for political gain, not necessarily because they are Muslim believers or nationalist fanatics. Being of the same ethnic heritage, Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims are pawns in the hands of Yugoslavia's old Communist leaders who are struggling for power and territory.

But whether nationalism is ethnically based or not—or whether it is a power tool or a political philosophy—it is still fundamentally illiberal.

Neo-Communism. So, too, are the various former Communist parties which, refashioning themselves as democratic socialists, are making a political comeback in Poland, Hungary, and Russia. Some of these neo-communists may accept the rules of democracy, and even pretend to embrace a market economy. Others may not. Some call themselves socialists, while others keep the name Communist. But one thing is certain: their political roots are not in Western liberalism.

Between neo-communism and Western liberalism, the conflict is mainly—but not only—over economic policy. Notwithstanding their market and democratic rhetoric, neo-communists in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union still favor socialist economic policies.

But that is not all they favor. Despite their abandonment of their totalitarian past, neo-communists throughout Eastern Europe and Eurasia still embrace a collectivist view of society and politics; Russian Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, for example, says repeatedly that the individualistic thinking of Western liberalism is “hostile to the Russian mentality.” Moreover, most neo-communists are more nationalistic in their foreign policy than liberal reformers. The Communist Party in Russia, for example, takes an imperialist position in foreign policy, calling for the restoration of the Soviet Union.

Islamic Fundamentalism. Western liberalism is under attack from Islamic and other forms of religious fundamentalism as well. Radical Islam, of course, is not a new phenomenon. Its struggle with Western liberalism began in earnest with the 1978-1979 Iranian revolution, and its presence during the Cold War period was mostly as a separate side show, only occasionally influencing the central game (in Afghanistan, for example).

However, radical Islam today has taken on a new face. It is more diverse, unpredictable, and therefore more dangerous. It has the new face of Iranian-backed guerrilla training camps in Sudan, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, of radical Islamic fundamentalists in Algeria, of new terrorist cells in Egypt and Lebanon, and even of terrorists attacks inside the U.S.—for example, on the World Trade Center in New York.

The Forces of Illiberalism. These three phenomena — nationalism, neo-communism and Islamic and other forms of religious fundamentalism — are today the main political and ideological threats and rivals to Western liberalism. They are the main forces of illiberalism in the world today. With their roots deep in history, they nonetheless have come to occupy a new place not only in world politics, but in history. They have supplanted the great ideological conflict that raged for much of the 20th century between totalitarian communism and fascism on the one side and Western liberalism on the other.

There are many differences between this old ideological and political struggle and the new ones. For one thing, neither nationalism nor Islamic fundamentalism has any significant following within the Western world, as communism and fascism once did (nationalism, however, is growing even in the Western world—in Europe, for example). For another, as ideologies, communism and fascism had far broader appeal in their time than nationalism, neo-communism, and Islamic fundamentalism do today. Moreover, neo-communism is not really totalitarian, nor is it as threatening and widespread as the original version.

But there is one striking similarity between the old twilight struggle and the new one: in both cases, there is a conflict between the basic tenets of illiberalism and liberalism.

For example, between nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism, on the one hand, and Western liberalism on the other, you see a conflict between:

- ✓ The identity, rights, and allegiances of a group, religious community or nation (in nationalism and radical Islam) vs. the rights of individuals (in Western liberalism)
- ✓ Authoritarian government vs. representative government
- ✓ Order vs. liberty
- ✓ Monolithic political systems vs. political pluralism
- ✓ Closed conformist cultures vs. open, competitive ones
- ✓ Corporate, statist or socialist economies vs. market economies

The conflict between neo-communism and Western liberalism is more ambiguous. It is still an open question whether the conversion of neo-communists to democracy and market economic principles is sincere. However, their adherence to socialist policies, their authoritarian streak, and their nationalist foreign policies suggest that it is not.

I do not wish to explain too much with this thesis; obviously, there are many developments in Bosnia, Russia, and the Middle East that must be explained by factors other than nationalism, neo-communism, and Islamic fundamentalism.

But I do believe that in these three phenomena we are witnessing a significant historical development: a reinvigoration of illiberal political movements. In other words, we are witnessing the revival of old challenges to Western liberalism, but done so in a new historical context and, in some cases, in new ways.

These new movements, though not as threatening as totalitarianism, could nonetheless prove to be dangerous indeed. In their extreme forms, nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism are already very dangerous. They could become even more so in the future. And while the twilight struggle with communism lasted only around 70 years, the West's struggle with permutations of nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, and other illiberal movements based on culture and religion could last much longer. After all, culture, religion, and national identities run much deeper than ideologies based on the theories of intellectuals.

There is one more point to consider. It is not quite right to suggest that the threat of Communist and fascist totalitarianism represented mainly a crisis within Western civilization. To be sure, there was a clash between liberalism and communism within the Western intellectual tradition, but in reality the conflict was much broader than that, encompassing political and cultural traditions outside the West. For example, Russia historically was not part of the West, yet it was there and in other non-Western countries, like China, that communism took root. And even in pre-World War II Germany, the root cause of nazism was the lack of a Western liberal tradition. At best, pre-war Germany was divided between East and West, while Russia had its roots in Byzantium and oriental forms of despotism.

In other words, communism and nazism took root in countries that either were outside the Western tradition, or were only tenuously tied to it.

If this is true, then it is not right to dismiss the reinvigoration of illiberal movements as insignificant because they are not occurring mainly within the West. In fact, nationalism already is an important political factor in Central and Eastern Europe, and it could prove to very dangerous indeed in Russia. With the exception of Germany and (hopefully) Japan, the future threats to Western liberalism most likely will come from the same places that have threatened it in the past—from Russia, China and the Middle East.

The Old and the New. Where the old and the new meet in this post-modern age is in the “the ideology of the group,” which is becoming more pervasive in political culture throughout the globe. Old group ideologies such as nationalism are being revived at a time when new forms of group ideologies are finding greater currency in the Western world. In the multicultural movement in this country, for example, group-defined rights of all kinds are working their way into U.S. law. Individuals are seeking special protection from the state because they belong to a group defined as a historical victim of discrimination.

Nationalism, of course, is a classic group ideology. It places the nation and its culture—the group—above the individual. This emphasis on the group is one of the reasons why nationalist states are so prone to form dictatorships and to endanger their neighbors. What worth is the individual or a neighboring country when the good and glory of the nation or ethnic group is of central importance? Suspending the rights of individuals or transgressing against neighboring nations is a lot easier to do under a group ideology than under Western liberalism. The former poses a defensive “us versus them” mentality, while the latter assumes a universality where all individuals and nations are created equal.

One reason why “democratic” nations—that is, nations sharing the values of Western liberalism—get along with one another better than nations which do not is that democracies share a belief in the principles of representative government, the market economy, and civil liberties. These domestic principles inspire their international principles, and thus define and limit their actions in world politics. Democracies can find common ground because they pursue their national interests according to common rules and internationally accepted standards of behavior, all of which are grounded in the classic Western liberal tradition.

Contrast this with the attitude of a nation whose legitimacy is grounded in notions of nationalism or sectarian religion. If the basic principle of political legitimacy is the cultural or religious rights of a people and a nation—something which is narrow, particularistic, and in some cases even xenophobic—then that nation and those people share nothing in common with other peoples or other nations. International politics becomes a zero-sum game. It would be a source of much instability and many wars.

It is no accident that some of the most disruptive and dangerous forces on the world scene today are also the most illiberal. There is a connection between their illiberal political culture and their aggressive and in some cases imperialistic foreign policies. Ultranationalists, Islamic fundamentalists, and other illiberal extremists want to overturn the international order because they believe it threatens their culture. Russian nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy wants to redraw the map of Eurasia, washing the boots of Russian soldiers in the Indian Ocean, because he believes that Russians are superior to other nationalities and have a right to lord over others. To a radical Iranian mullah, Khomeini’s brand of Islamic faith justifies not only assassination for blasphemous writings, but attacks on neighboring countries. And to Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, the cause of Serbian nationalism requires not only dismembering Bosnia, but thumbing his nose at NATO, the United Nations, and the entire outside world.

This understanding of nationalism and other group ideologies in world politics is important for us to know. It shows that we are not dealing with forces that can be easily accommodated or won over. It shows an intractability and inflexibility that is based on fundamentally different values and goals—something akin to that which Communist regimes displayed toward us during the Cold War. And it shows that the U.S. agenda of pressing for democracy and free markets abroad has limits, not only practically but philosophically and culturally.

THE WORLD DIVIDED: THE REALIGNMENT OF WORLD POWER

I would now like to turn to a second trend in world politics—one that is partly the result of some of the forces I have already described.

The world today is undergoing a profound realignment of power. The end of the Cold War did more than unleash pent-up forces like nationalism. It also rearranged the stage of global politics. It took some old players, like the Soviet Union, out of the game, creating power vacuums in Europe and Eurasia. It added new prominence to other countries like Japan and China which are playing greater regional roles than before. Of course, it helped to create a passiveness in U.S. foreign policy, reflected in Bill Clinton's near paralysis on issues like Bosnia. And while it eased some longstanding conflicts, such as between the Arabs and Israelis, it created new ones in Bosnia and large parts of the former Soviet Union.

Collapsing Power Centers and Power Vacuums. Perhaps the single most striking feature of this new realignment of power is the collapse of former power centers and the creation of power vacuums. The most obvious of this case, of course, has been in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. As a result, wars have broken out in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, and Bosnia, and there is widespread instability throughout the region. Nor should we forget that Russia has been on the verge of civil war twice in the past three years.

The obvious result has been to take Russia out of the superpower game. We thought for a while—in the heady days of the new world order and the Persian Gulf war—that U.S.-Russian cooperation would bring peace to a host of regional conflicts.

While cooperation with Russia was rather good in 1991-1992, lately Russia has proven to be either too weak or unwilling to play a major international role in settling regional conflicts. Moscow's inability to persuade the Serbs to keep their peace pledges, for example, has shown the limits of their contribution to European peace and stability.

Another consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Empire has been the steady discrediting of existing international institutions. This was wholly unexpected. Many people believed that the United Nations would triumph now that the paralyzing East-West conflict was over. Of course, it did not.

And many thought that NATO and other Western security structures in Europe could weather the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. Of course, NATO has had a difficult time finding a new identity. The Bosnian crisis has bled the credibility out not only of NATO, but out of the United Nations as well.

While NATO has had a hard time, the former countries of the Warsaw Pact have had even more difficulties. They have been unable to integrate themselves adequately into any international or regional system of security or political and economic cooperation. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are knocking on NATO's door. But the allies refuse to open it wide enough to let them in, shunting them instead to an ambiguously defined antechamber. The Commonwealth of Independent States is weak and unworkable. And the United Nations has proved completely unable to influence events in the CIS and Eastern Europe.

All in all, the former states of the Eastern bloc are, for a variety of reasons, not doing very well. Nor are they being integrated rapidly into the West, as we hoped a few years back. They are stumbling along, seething in their instability, and the lack of any transnational system to establish regional security does not bode well for the future.

Other power vacuums are emerging in the world as well. The defeat of Saddam Hussein has created a power vacuum which only the United States can fill. The U.S. now is the main military

