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Zero Sum Foreign Policy: the UN Option

By Lowell Flanders
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“The strength of a civilization is not measured by its ability to fight wars, but rather by its ability to prevent them.”

— Gene Roddenberry

America loves a winner. Our entire culture of games and gamesmanship is built around the idea of being the winner. The worst epithet Donald Trump can imagine is “loser,” a word he uses frequently. Being a loser must be his worst nightmare. But somewhere in his heart there must be a soft spot for losers, because they are the lifeblood of his casino world, even though the winners get the accolades. In the world of corporate consulting, management gurus often speak about creating win/win scenarios, where all the parties walk away believing they are winners.

In war, there is no substitute for winning, because the consequences for countries that lose are economic and physical devastation. But the conditions for avoiding war and ensuring stable and peaceful relations among countries require entirely different considerations. The winner take all mentality when projected on to relations between countries more often leads to renewed conflict. Losers can be resentful, and simply lie in wait for the next opportunity to strike. Germany after WWI and the Versailles Treaty is a prime example. Rubbing your opponent’s face in the dirt after winning is hardly good form.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the triumphalism on the American side was palpable. Our attitude was: we won; they lost: Tough on them! And in that winner take all arrogance; we lost a real opportunity to move Russia along a more democratic path. As Mikhail Gorbachev said in a May 22, 2016 article in the UK Sunday Times: “Under the table, the Americans were rubbing their hands with glee.” “They thought, ‘Now we’re the boss of the world.’ They weren’t genuinely interested in helping Russia develop into a stable and strong democracy. They thought they’d cut Russia down to size. In the process, they’ve squandered the trust we’d built.”

Despite Russia’s efforts to be a responsible player in the international community, prior to their suspension from the G8 over Crimea, the US has continually tried to cut Russia down to size, boxing them in on all sides by pushing the limits of NATO membership closer and closer to the Russian heartland, including proxy interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. However much, we in the West, may vilify Vladimir Putin, his actions mirror those of Russian leaders before him, who instinctively fought to protect Russia’s territorial integrity. Ukraine, “serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia, [since] Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany all crossed [it] to strike at Russia itself.” No Russian leader, whatever his name, is going to sit idly by while NATO incorporates Ukraine into its orbit.

The Obama administration has, at the same time, focused more attention on limiting China’s influence in the South China Sea region, sending in warships and planes to assert the “interests” of America and its friends in the region. Leaving large countries like Russia and China with no room to maneuver, with no spheres of influence where the US does not intrude, is a dangerous game that will leave no winners.

With the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the US blocked out its sphere of interest to cover the entire Western hemisphere. And we have guarded it jealously. When the Soviets installed nuclear missiles in Cuba, we were quick to respond. It was only by a hair’s breadth that we escaped all out nuclear war. Now it seems, America’s sphere of influence covers the whole world. No allowance for any other claimants permitted.

How did we come to this zero sum, winner take all, approach to foreign policy? Perhaps a product of the cold war, it was best articulated by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was not timid in making the claim for US global hegemony. He asserted that America’s chief task is to maintain its “global primacy” over the vast area of Eurasia, stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, and, “to make certain that no state or combination of states gains the capacity to expel the United States from Eurasia or even to diminish significantly its decisive arbitrating role.” Stop for a moment and contemplate the stunning conceit wrapped up in that formulation: control of the entire Eurasian landmass. Napoleon and Hitler had similar delusions.

This theme was also taken up by America’s neocons in their Project for the New American Century in the spring of 1997. Facing no global rivals, America’s grand strategy should aim to “preserve and extend [our] advantageous position as far into the future as possible, ... maintaining global US pre-eminence, precluding the rise of a great power rival, and shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests.”

In their 2016 Manifesto, the neocons are still at it, despite the abject failure of their predictions about Iraq. They contend that the U.S. should be the “guarantor of global order.” Thus, they deem Beijing’s aspirations unacceptable and decry “replacing the American-shaped order that enabled China’s ‘peaceful rise’ with a system in which we are only one of multiple, equal participants.” Russia, Iran, North Korea ... also qualify as key threats.

The zero sum approach to foreign policy, where any gain by Russia or China, or any other country, is viewed as a loss to us, appears to have a strong hold over our foreign policy and military elites. But we have to ask; does this approach help to prevent and resolve conflicts around the world, or does it make them worse? Look around. Have we been able to guarantee global order? The opposite is the case. The US has actually contributed to world disorder by its invasion of Iraq, among other unilateral actions. Following the US lead, some countries now apparently believe that they too are free to invade or subvert other sovereign countries. Think Saudi Arabia in Yemen, or Turkey in Syria.

In the zero sum world view, you might well assume there are no laws or principles around which relations among countries can be regulated, and no way global order can be guaranteed, except through the unilateral application of military force by the United States, following the old adage, “Might, Makes Right.”

In 1945, at the end of WWII, world leaders understood clearly the principles upon which world order needed to be built to avoid the death and destruction unleashed by that war. Those principles were clearly spelled out in the Charter of the United Nations. The *Herald Tribune* headlines at the time proclaimed: “Ban on Aggression is Voted!” Current leaders have apparently forgotten the gruesome lessons of the past and brushed aside these principles of collective security as somehow naïve, passé or no longer relevant to national and global interests.

Among the principles they enumerated as essential to regulating relations among countries are (1) the sovereign equality of all states, regardless of size or national wealth; (2) not to use force or the threat of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country (3) to settle all disputes between countries by peaceful means (4) preventive or enforcement action against a country to be taken only through a collective decision by member states in the context of the Security Council. There is no provision in the Charter for unilateral action by one country against another for any reason, humanitarian or otherwise, except for self-defense when a country is subject to attack or outright invasion by another. These principles have the additional strength of being incorporated as a formal treaty under international law and fully ratified under US law.

Although he doesn’t credit the UN Charter, these are the same characteristics Henry Kissinger identifies in his book *World Order*, (Penguin Publishing, 2014) derived from the Treaties of Westphalia, namely, the principles of national independence, sovereign statehood, national interest, noninterference in the affairs of other states, and a balance of power or interests. As he recounts, the observance of these principles have kept countries at peace during substantial periods of time in our past. It is based on “commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down, preventing one political unit from subjugating all others.”

If we know the principles for maintaining peace and collective security and have the institutions, treaties and laws that incorporate those principles, what keeps us from doing better?

There is no defect in the principles of the UN Charter, but leaders at the time adopted a structural impediment: the veto power of the five permanent members. On critical votes, this has curtailed the ability of the Security Council to take effective action when the interests of a permanent member are at stake. But, the bigger challenge to collective security is the dominant claims of a single “exceptional” country to act as global policeman to enforce its vision of world order. John Bolton probably expressed it most clearly, when he said: “If I were redoing the Security Council today, I’d have one permanent member, because that’s the real reflection of the distribution of power in the world — the United States.” “There is no United Nations,” he said. “There is an international community that occasionally can be led by the only real power left in the world, and that’s the United States, when it suits our interest, and when we can get others to go along.” Or as stated more adroitly by Henry Kissinger, “Empires have no interest in operating within an international system; they aspire to *be* the international system.”

This myopic view seriously underestimates the power and capacity of both Russia and China, either separately or collectively to do damage, if we push our unilateralist claims too far. Further, it over estimates the economic strength of the US, as evidenced by the near melt down of the economic system in 2008. While we have spent trillions of dollars on wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya, with catastrophic results (no winners here), our domestic infrastructure and the economic well-being of our own people have deteriorated precipitously. A country crumbling on the inside with increasing social divisions, and an economic system held together by baling wire and chewing gum, should look to its own internal problems rather than playing the international busy-body seeking to regulate everyone else’s business. Building a more stable, prosperous and peaceful world should be the collective responsibility of all states, not just the one, which conceives itself to be “indispensible.”

We need a serious reset of our relationships with other countries and the world at large, re-dedicating ourselves to collective action and security in the context of a revitalized United Nations that fully observes and implements its founding principles, which remain the only basis for peaceful relations among states. Playing the role of world enforcer hardly becomes us, and runs counter to our democratic heritage. Exercising self-restraint in the use of power, fully recognizing the national interests of other states, and being content as the “first among equals,” would make the UN more effective in preserving world order. It is not the worst fate that could befall us. It could be a win/win for everyone.