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When Security Reigns Supreme: Normative reflections on the future of Russia-NATO relations after September 11

Presentation by Carlos Escudé

Senior Tenured Researcher, Argentine National Council of Scientific Research (CONICET), and Professor of International Relations, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires.

As most of us know, long before the term “globalization” was coined Immanuel Wallerstein pioneered a field of enquiry and reflection about the long-term of international affairs that can be comprised in the concept “the world-system approach”. His erudite work and that of his disciples focuses on the hegemonic transitions of the so called modern world-system, mainly from an economic point of view, from the 16th Century onwards. The lack of a parallel focus on security issues is probably the reason why the advocates of the world-system perspective failed to detect a major transition, from the modern to the postmodern world-system, as a consequence of the advent of the era of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in 1945.¹ Increasingly from that date onwards, mankind’s capacity for self-destruction made total war insane, yet due to the Cold War we were always on the verge of a human holocaust.

When the Cold War went away many thought our gravest troubles were over. Intoxicated with the triumphs of globalization, most analysts neglected the fact the proliferation of WMDs posed a grave and present danger to the human species, and that this peril was accentuated because an increasingly important segment of humanity was embracing extremist ideas and attitudes that would render traditional deterrence inoperative. The Islamic fundamentalist terrorist attacks that took so many lives in Moscow in 1999 and in my own native city of Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994 were perceived as domestic affairs in the United States, the overwhelmingly dominant leader of the West and the overarching factor in the world politics.

Suddenly, however, in the span of twenty minutes, the momentous tragedy of September 11 shifted American perceptions 180 degrees. Suddenly, civilized humanity (Muslims included) confronted a common enemy: a network of globalized terrorist organizations inspired in Islamic extremism that uses suicide as a weapon for mass murder and global blackmail. Because of its readiness for suicide it is an enemy that cannot be deterred through mutually-assured-destruction tactics as did the Cold War foes. It is an enemy that probably would not hesitate to use WMDs if it possessed them powerful enough and in sufficient numbers as to allow it to envisage the destruction of its pet Satans, even if that meant that the perpetrators of the attack would also be obliterated.

A common enemy as fearsome as the present one is precisely what was needed to change crystallized paranoid attitudes between the planet’s two nuclear superpowers, Russia and the United States. Just as there was a “before” and “after” Hiroshima, there is a before and after September 11 that will probably remain with us forever. Before September 11 NATO’s foremost tacticians believed that the Organization had prospects for reaching a

reciprocal accommodation with Russia in Europe, but that what happened elsewhere—in the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia—was probably beyond the reach of a possible NATO-Russia strategic partnership. After September 11, despite lingering misgivings, we witnessed the miracle of US-Russian cooperation in Central Asia, later extended to an agreement on the reduction of nuclear arsenals, and most recently, to the creation of the new NATO-Russia council. Suddenly everything is possible. Utopia itself becomes respectable again.

Indeed, in his premonitory utopia, *Union Now*,² Clarence Streit advocated for some sort of institutional arrangement designed to administrate, on a global basis, the challenges facing democratic humanity that cannot be dealt with efficiently without such a global administration. In the postmodern phase of the world-system these objectives have become no less than the functional prerequisites for human survival. Let me make this clear. The scale of government required for the successful management of issues depends on the scale of the issues themselves. Many traffic regulations will always remain in charge of city governments. Many intermediate-scale issues require intermediate-scale government, be it provincial, “national” or continental. But coping with globalized mega-terrorism requires some sort of global arrangement that can only be achieved through an active cooperative alliance that amalgamates the greatest possible amount of military power in the smallest possible number of democratically-ruled states. This implies no more and no less than a global strategic alliance between NATO and Russia, preferably through the inclusion of Russia itself in NATO.

This grand alliance has a direct precedent in World War II and the struggle against Nazi-Fascism. But the tragic scenario that recently generated the functional need for such an alliance is a lasting one, because every day, every month, every year that passes without major actions against this enemy of humanity is extra time for the terrorist organizations to acquire the WMDs with which they may indeed annihilate life in our planet. The dilemma is whether to risk the life of the species itself, or to be willing to wage war collectively to preserve life, civilization, democracy and freedom.

Thus, there no longer is a true dilemma. The problem is how to achieve that without which we are all lost. To make it feasible, we must all be ready to make concessions that seem at odds with old notions of absolute sovereignty, accepting what has become a fact-of-life in the present postmodern phase of the world-system. This fact-of-life is that inevitably, the democratic states that compose the world-system must acknowledge that there are rule-makers and rule-takers among them; that this is the only way to successfully face the present and lasting challenge posed by globalized mega-terrorism; that it is for the good of all, and that it is therefore a categorical imperative to accept a world-order led, in the security realm, by the foremost military powers, while it is essentially immoral to oppose it.

In order to advance conceptually and clarify what was just said, we must consider that the world-system is composed of two subsystems, a world-economy and a security-structure, and that while both have a core, a semi-periphery and a periphery, the core and periphery of each subsystem are not one and the same. As overlapping with NATO, the European Union may be considered part of the core of the security-structure of the postmodern world-system, but with the possible exception of the United Kingdom, no individual state member of the EU is really a part of that core. Contrariwise, Russia is part of that core but is in the periphery of a world-economy, while Germany is a part of that economic core not only as a party to the EU but as an individual state.

As developed in my works on peripheral realism, the rule-makers are inevitably the core countries, in both subsystems.³ Russia cannot be an economic rule-maker, at least for the time being. Germany cannot be a rule-maker in the politico-military sphere. Belgium cannot be a rule-maker in either, except marginally as a party to NATO and the EU. And New Zealand not even as such. Any attempt to build an order that does not respect this rule-of-thumb is doomed to fail. Thucydides already knew it when he coined his dictum, “the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must”⁴.

In the postmodern phase of the world-system, we should rephrase the Athenian historian’s wisdom in terms of a convergence between:

1. The common good for all democracies (an ethical value),
2. The self-interest of weaker states (in whatever sphere) to avoid needless confrontations with the powerful so as not to inflict unnecessary costs upon their citizens (an aim which is simultaneously of practical and ethical value), and
3. The common good of a human species put at risk by a suicidal terrorist enemy that, paradoxically, is also its own worst enemy even if it does not know it. This is no less than the supreme moral imperative that eclipses all other considerations, ethical and practical.

Therefore, until a fully cosmopolitan, one citizen—one vote world-system is achieved, and this is *very* far away, the strong states *should* be in charge because only they can enforce rules without which the system collapses. Likewise, weak yet democratic states *should* follow suit because it is in their interests to avoid a holocaust, and because it is in the interests of their citizens to maintain cooperative relations with the rule-makers. Weaker democratic states have a moral obligation to adopt what I call citizen-centric policies, i.e. policies conceived to enhance the welfare and freedom of the citizens instead of the power of the state.

This runs counter to nearly all Anglo-American international relations theory, which irrespectively of how “liberal” it purports to be is mostly state-centric. Through flawed logic and false analogies, it has advocated a rationale that serves the interests of the states rather than their citizens, and least of all the interests of global humanity. The prevailing analogy whereby the state is to the interstate system what the individual is to the state inevitably leads—at least at a logical level—to the sacrifice of the individuals, their interests, rights and freedom (as we have witnessed repeatedly in Third World despotisms). In an era of proliferation of WMDs this flawed logic also jeopardizes the very governability of the world-system, leading to the imperilment of humanity.⁵

These arguments converge with Clarence Streit’s basic philosophical assumptions. He severely attacked what he called “the autocratic principle of absolute national sovereignty in the democracies”, which he considered in itself a betrayal of democracy. And indeed, only such an autocratic principle could prevent us from acknowledging:

1. That states are not “like units” (as Kenneth Waltz and other neorealists would claim),
2. That they have differentiated roles in the interstate system (which Waltz and his disciples would deny)⁶, and
3. That some states are “naturally” (by virtue of the outcome of historical process) rule-makers, while others are “naturally” rule-takers.

In the security subsystem of the postmodern world-system only the Atlantic Alliance (with the United States at its helm) and Russia qualify as rule-makers. Hence, it is the moral imperative of every other democratic, citizen-centric state to abdicate from aspirations to

politico-military leadership, delegating that role to the states capable of assuming it by virtue of their military capabilities and democratic nature.

It may be considered a paradox, but I argue that the concentration of military power in as few states as possible, preferably allied between themselves, is essential for the stability and survival of the postmodern world-system and, indeed, of mankind itself, which could not survive its collapse. In the absence of a fully cosmopolitan world-system, which should be the ultimate aim but is still in a remote horizon, concentration of power means that weaker democratic states should abdicate military leadership to an eventual NATO-Russia global strategic partnership.

In another era, previous to the advent of WMD, Streit argued along analogous lines, criticizing balance of power theory on the grounds that it is zero-sum, and that balance, if achieved, is the most fragile of all achievements. He said:

“We do not and can not get peace by balance of power; we can and do get it by *unbalance* of power. We get it by putting so much weight surely on the side of law that the strongest law-breaker can not possibly offset it and is bound to be overwhelmed. We get lasting stability by having one side of the balance safely on the ground and the other side high in the air. (...) The race is to the strongest, and the democracies to win need only scrap this balance of power and neutrality nonsense and directly seek peace in the unbalance of power that Union alone can quickly and securely give them.”⁷

‘Union’, yes, when a federalist, fully cosmopolitan world order is finally achieved, step by step. But meanwhile, a strategic global partnership between NATO and Russia, made ever more necessary by the events of September 11, must be built urgently and effectively in order to deactivate the threat of globalized mega-terrorism before it is too late, that is to say before the extremist organizations that have declared war on humanity acquire sufficient WMDs as to put their suicidal methods at the service of Doomsday.

Having said this, it follows that an operational plan for a preemptive war on globalized mega-terrorism must be laid out. The United States and Britain began the campaign successfully in Afghanistan, with the cooperation of other powers including Russia. Apparently, Iraq is the likely target of a coming phase of the war. But in order to advance in the establishment of the NATO-Russia alliance the world so badly needs, some crucial and unsettling issues must be confronted and solved.

In my opinion there are some strategic questions that must be addressed and settled in order both to strike a bargain and advance in the war against terror. I am not speaking of the difficult technical problems of finding adequate decision-making mechanisms within the Euro-Atlantic institutions in order to make Russia’s integration feasible, which I leave to others, but rather of the strategic diagnosis and the identification of the mutual strategic concessions that the United States and Russia must make to each other if a NATO-Russia global alliance is to become viable. Two geographic areas in which mutual strategic concessions will probably be necessary are, in my opinion, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

With respect to the Persian Gulf, the West must confront the difficult question regarding the status of regimes like Saudi Arabia’s. Is it beneficial to count with the basically pro-Western foreign policies of the House of Saud in the war against terror? Or is it in fact a liability to support a state that because it has pro-Western foreign policies, is allowed to harbor billionaire financiers of extremist Islamic terrorism, in a domestic context almost wholly friendly to these activities? Is part of the root of the clear and present danger

of globalized mega-terrorism lurking in the Saudi kingdom and neighboring emirates? Maybe not, but the issue must be addressed, and if it is found relevant, what should be the priorities in the war against terror, after Iraq? And what do we do about the oil in the region? Should it be used to fund the war against terror? Then again, maybe not, but a clear and rational diagnosis must be reached whatever the conclusion. This may be an issue regarding which Russia may have to make major strategic concessions to NATO in general and the United States in particular.

With respect to Central Asia, we have the opposite situation, that is, a realm in which NATO and the United States may have to make major concessions to Russia. The region is also crucial for the war against terror. It was of strategic value during the Afghan campaign, and because of the terrorist organizations that operate there, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which is a part of the global web of terror, it will continue to be strategically relevant. But it projects itself directly into the terrorist organizations that operate within the Russian Federation, it has links to Islamic terrorist rebels in Chechnya and Dagestan, and is historically very much a part of the Russian hinterland. With misgivings, after September 11 Russia accepted an American military presence in the region, which in my view probably should remain in place, but the issue of whether or not the United States should offer Russia a clear primacy in that oil-rich region, as a quid-pro-quo for Russia's support of American Persian Gulf policy, should be studied very carefully.

Once again, whatever the conclusions may be, a clear rationale must be laid out carefully. And the consideration of the imperative reasons that underlie the dire functional need for a NATO-Russia alliance in the postmodern phase of the world-system must have a central place in this study. It is of the utmost urgency that it not be laid aside blindly, as a consequence of an automated mode of decision-making that prioritizes the paranoia, misgivings and geopolitical competition which grew out of the Cold War.

That historical episode is over, and now both Russia and NATO have a common enemy which is the most dangerous ever faced by humanity. The opportunity to engineer institutions that would eliminate the last remaining sequels of the Cold War and make the world a safer place through the step-by-step integration of powerful democratic states must not be wasted. It is a challenge for practitioners and academics alike, whose work is complementary. Paradoxically, the common enemy provides the essential political motivation for the eventual integration of Russia, a nuclear superpower, in the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Concepts and categories of analysis must also be built to facilitate diagnosis and decision-making. In my opinion, the study of long-term history must aid us in this endeavor. This is the reason why I began with a reference to Wallerstein. The "world-system" approach must be perfected by acknowledging that the "security structure" of a world-system is as important as its "world-economy". The concept of "globalization" must also be perfected, eliminating its economicist bias. We must acknowledge that even events that fragmented the world politically, like the two world wars and the Cold War, were part of a globalization pattern in which the "means of destruction" gradually became global. The transition from the "modern" to the "postmodern world-system" must be acknowledged, with all its sinister implications for eventual "hegemonic crises and transitions". It must be fully perceived that the "globalization of the means of destruction" is here to stay, regardless of the future of financial, commercial and political globalization, because it is exclusively the product of technology, and humanity rarely if ever de-invents anything. This is why commercial and political globalization must not be allowed to collapse: if it

does, geopolitical tensions would rise, the terrorist threat would become unmanageable, and in the long-term holocaustic war would inexorably be unleashed.

In order to avoid this, we must advance towards the “amalgamation of politico-military power” in as few heads as possible. This is why a NATO-Russia global alliance has become a supreme moral imperative as well as a step that, seen from a long-term perspective, is materially beneficial for all the parties concerned and to wider humanity itself, which cannot survive without it. And even if undemocratic state elites will not always see it that way, this enhancement of human security would be very much to the benefit of the peoples of the Third World.

When ethical and material considerations converge the scene is set for a bargain. Only folly can prevent it. That’s all. Thank you very much.

NOTES

¹ C. Escudé, “When Security Reigns Supreme: The Postmodern World-System vis-à-vis Globalized Terrorism and Organized Crime”, in R. Stemplowski (ed.), *Transnational Terrorism in the World System Perspective*, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw 2002; “The European Union and Global Security in the Postmodern World-System”, in R. Stemplowski (ed.) *The European Union in the World System Perspective*, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw 2002.

² Clarence Streit, *Union Now*, Washington D.C.: Freedom & Union Press, 1939.

³ C. Escudé, *Foreign Policy Theory...* (1997) and “An introduction to peripheral realism...” (1998).

⁴ In the context of my peripheral realism, it is explicitly clear that this does **not** mean that weaker countries should cave in to stronger states when economic interests directly linked to the welfare of their citizens are involved. On the contrary, the bargaining power and limited political confrontation capabilities of weaker states should be saved precisely for such conflicts of interest.

⁵ This analogy is essentially flawed, but very few authors are aware of its fallacy. State freedom and individual freedom, for example, are fundamentally at odds with each other. The reason is that if the state is to have full ‘freedom’ to maneuver in the interstate order, it must be able to subject its population to whatever sacrifices are necessary to achieve its ends, sometimes with brutal limitations of individual freedom and other civil rights, which are themselves subordinated to the *raison d'état*. In other words: **Total state freedom = absolute domestic tyranny.**

⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979; page 114.

⁷ C. Streit, *op.cit.*, Chapter 1, Part II.