The recent appearance of Russian President Vladimir Putin before the UN was a command performance for any Western analyst who wants a deeper and more brazen access to Russian global affairs thinking. The traditional mistake made, by Americans most certainly, is to dismiss Russian argument as nothing but crying over spilt geostrategic milk: in short, since Russia lost the Cold War and lost its beloved communist system, it cannot stop diplomatically whining about the victor. While there is no doubt that there have been over the past two and a half decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union some examples of resentment by the Russian government over its fall from grace off of the bipolar world stage, it would be reckless and unwise to permanently paint Russian diplomacy with the bitterness brush. American political recklessness can indeed be found just as much, if not more than, examples of Russian diplomatic petulance.

Indeed, some of the more memorable quotes from Putin’s speech are in fact ideas he has spoken openly about for the past decade:

"After the end of the Cold War, a single center of domination emerged in the world, and then those who found themselves at the top of the pyramid were tempted to think they were strong and exceptional,
they knew better."

"An aggressive foreign interference has resulted in a brazen destruction of national institutions . . . Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty and social disaster. Nobody cares a bit about human rights, including the right to life."

"We are all different, and we should respect that. No one has to conform to a single development model that someone has once and for all recognized as the right one."

The problem in all of this, of course, is that the United States will adamantly defend its good intentions in each and every case of foreign intervention and/or pursuit of its national interests on the global stage. Ironically, Russia has been the only country to date that accepted the American right to behave in this manner but only if that right was granted as a universal reality of global affairs and power disbalance. And that is where the United States and Russian Federation have always wildly disagreed. I have written many times before, much to the chagrin of my American colleagues, that on this one point at least logic and consistency side more heavily with Russia’s argument. Anyone who studies international relations knows well the internal philosophical dilemma between politics as they are versus politics as they ought to be. Think of it as Locke and Rousseau fighting against Hobbes and Machiavelli. Russia openly and unabashedly accepts global affairs as being the exclusive realist domain of Hobbes and Machiavelli: life is brutish, nasty, and short, and the preservation of power is not moral or immoral but rather an amoral pursuit that is simply about capability and effective strategy. Before you think that means America sits squarely on the side of Locke and Rousseau, on the side of freedom and civil liberty, think again: America has always been equally ready to recognize the nastiness of foreign affairs and the deviousness that is sometimes required to get a mission accomplished. But America is just about the only country on earth that can recognize that reality while simultaneously proclaiming itself and its own behaviors as somehow above such realist ends-justifying-the-means gamesmanship.

Welcome to what drives the Russian diplomat absolutely insane with incredulous frustration. Russia (and to a lesser extent China) has always dismissed this inconsistency. In fact, some might argue Russia has been somewhat gleeful in pointing this hypocrisy out. This was exactly what was happening this past week at the UN with Putin’s speech. The Russian President basically stood back from the podium, symbolically spread his arms out wide, and with a Cheshire cat grin, declared to the world watching: So, America, are you happy now? Are we ready to get serious about cleaning up these messes now? While most of America has been critiquing the Russian presence in Syria as just a cheaply-veiled attempt to keep Assad in power while supposedly trying to do damage to DAESH, Russia looks on bemusedly and says, ‘ah, yeah, exactly. What’s your point???’ After all, it was over three years ago that Russia publicly said the removal of Assad from Damascus might not be all that America was cracking it up to be: the ‘rebel alliance’ seemed to be a fractured and disorganized band of miscreants. While some were true rebels aiming to topple a decrepit regime with the democratic experiment that had been washing over the Middle East in general with the Arab Spring, there were plenty of others who were crossing secretly over the border from Turkey looking to help radical Islamists fill what could be an expected power vacuum. Russia will always be worried about radical Islamists on its southern flank. The fact that this happened to be taking place in a country whose leader was politically-aligned with Moscow just made the decision-making calculus simpler. Thus, when America lobs an accusation that Russia isn’t fighting DAESH but supporting Assad, Russia with complete sincerity responds that it is openly and unashamedly doing BOTH. The only country in the world more afraid of or against the spread of radical Islam than the United States is Russia. It also does not have a problem with countries determining and preserving whatever system of power central authority can maintain (see quote above). No, Russia does not believe this principle results in the most free, most open, and most democratic societies emerging. But it does believe this principle keeps the global stage far more stable. American contradictory experiments in tampering (where it believes that it is exceptional to all other countries but that its exceptional system and beliefs should be exported everywhere else) is what rocks global equilibrium to Russia. China has always believed in this reality as well. But it is Russia that has taken on the unique responsibility to call the United States out for it. Again and again and again.

What some might think is that this is a diatribe against American arrogance, or that American ‘moral imperialism’ has to be met with resistance from countries like Russia. I think this is an overstatement. I don’t believe Russia worries about such things. It may state things to that effect for the mere drama and ‘media sexiness’ of calling America out. But the real reason Russia stands against the posturing of American de facto exceptionalism is that it sincerely believes it leaves nothing but a mess behind. The worry is not that America is taking over the world (anyone who looks at Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Syria understands that American intervention doesn’t result in any immediate and positive American interests), even if Russia thinks America might want to take over the world,
fantasy-style. No. The problem is that America never truly actively commits, but rather ‘half-commits’ to its interests. This is what results in the chaos. Russia entering Syria and actively conducting air raids on various DAESH and rebel positions is simply Putin saying ‘THIS is our priority and so we will act. Because we have the power to do so and therefore it is our right.” It believes this same right was acted upon by America with all of its adventures overseas. What’s good for the American goose will always be seen as also just fine for the Russian gander. At the very least, there is something refreshing about a country stating where it stands and then acting exactly in accordance with that position, rightly or wrongly. And anyone who knows Russia and Russian history, this aspect, of charging forward whether it is undeniably proper and correct or irrefutably brash and impatient, is wonderfully consistent of the Russian foreign policy character.

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