

# The United States and the Rule of Law in a Polycentric World

Ramesh Thakur  
*Australian National University*

## Abstract

In the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides writes that justice applies only to relations among equals and in dealings with others, the strong do what they can while the weak suffer what they must. In the post-Cold War unipolar moment, US exceptionalism was manifested in Washington exempting itself from norms and laws that it was prepared to enforce on others. Accusations of double standards on some major issues like nuclear weapons and the Israel–Palestinian conflict are of long standing. But with the relative shift of wealth and influence to the rising powers, the ability of the US-led West to persist with selective application of norms and laws will be called into increasing question. This makes it all the more surprising that in a six-month period, the US managed to pick quarrels with three of the BRICS – China, India and Russia – regarding standards of behaviour where each could instantly point to US violations of the same norms. This undermines prospects of forming coalitions with them on issues of common concern or against third countries. Coverage of the events by the US mainstream media, far from questioning critically, tends to reinforce the double standards. To adjust to the rising powers in a polycentric global order, the US must confront three choices: downgrade the importance of and ignore laws and norms, basing actions on material interests and relative power; elevate laws and norms over immediate material interests; or when others violate norms that are too difficult for the US itself to follow, respond according to a calculation of relative strategic interests and stakes, not abstract standards of behaviour.

## Policy Implications

- The US should identify and respect (unless they undermine US vital interests) the core security and economic interests of the likely major powers in the coming decades, threats to which will provoke pushback instead of capitulation to US demands.
- As the era of US full spectrum dominance fades, Washington must begin to prioritise its own interests with respect to issues, subordinating the merely desirable to the key vital interests; and with respect to countries, so that minor European countries do not jeopardise the triangular strategic relations with Russia and China to push the last two closer together in an anti-US coalition.
- The traditional balance of power policy of trying to preclude other major powers from coalescing against the US as the balancer should be followed but also updated to issue-specific coalitions.
- The US should refrain from criticising and sanctioning other major players for violation of norms and laws that it itself is unable to uphold;
- The US should use the remaining years of global primacy to create a world in which it will be comfortable living when no longer the dominant actor.

At West Point on 28 May, President Barack Obama (2014a) insisted: 'The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it'. In his speech to the UN General Assembly on 24 September, Obama (2014b) insisted that 'all of us – big nations and small – must meet our responsibility to observe and enforce international norms'. The two statements, less than five months apart, are not compatible and indeed the second was in the context of criticising Russia for actions in Crimea and Ukraine undertaken in defence of *its* core interests. The use of force is legally permissible only in self-defence against armed attack or when authorised by the United Nations. Therefore, no country that reserves the right to use military force unilaterally can claim to be committed to obeying global norms. Exceptionalism as belief in a uniquely virtuous republic with a moral mission to export life, liberty and happiness to the rest of the world is hard-wired into US national identity and likely to endure. Exceptionalism as policy was dependent on the unipolar moment of full spectrum dominance and is fatally undermined by the transformation into a polycentric global order, of which groupings like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – the G-group that is most symbolic of the shifting global order) and the G-20 are both symbolic and substantive expressions.

This article argues that Washington has wandered into the realm of policy incoherence by attempting to enforce – the second part of Obama's UN statement – international norms on three rising powers while violating the same norms itself. The normative discordance is rooted in the foreign policy exceptionalism practised by the Bush administration that has been continued in essence by the Obama administration, if without the in-your-face style of diplomacy that characterised his predecessor. But US capacity to sustain such double standards is steadily eroding as relative wealth, power and

influence shift from the West to some of the key emerging powers among the rest. The failure to address the discrepancy will damage both US interests and the global normative order and could provoke an unwanted conflict.

To paraphrase and update the mantra of Realism, international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for normative ascendancy: the establishment and maintenance of the dominant normative architecture of international order created and maintained by the interplay of power, ideas and values. Cognisant of the stern admonition from Athens to Melos that questions of right and justice apply only to relations among equals in power, while for others 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must' (Thucydides, 1910, p. 5.89), 'Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states' (Morgenthau, 1967, p. 10), although Morgenthau hedged his bets when he wrote of 'the moral dignity of the national interest' (Morgenthau, 1951, p. 33). Subsequent history has modified the thesis with a steady reduction in societal, national and international violence from the hunter-gatherer civilisations to modern times, based on empathy, self-control, reason and moral sense as 'the better angels' of human nature (Pinker, 2011).

That is, over the centuries the pendulum of human behaviour has swung surely, albeit slowly and in a jagged rather than linear trajectory, from the 'pure' power towards the normative end of the arc of history. Of course, in every era, great powers have a disproportionate ability to influence the prevailing norms and laws also, just as in domestic systems even if every citizen has the same one vote, the social elite has much greater access to the political process for writing the rules to govern society. Over the last few centuries, Western ideas and values have found expression as 'universal' norms and been embedded in the dominant

institutions of global governance not necessarily because they are intrinsically superior, but more importantly behind battleships, missiles and tanks.

That being the case, what are the implications for the normative architecture of international order as the underlying great power relations are restructured fundamentally? Both the US National Intelligence Council (NIC,[2008](#), p. 7) and the UN's Human Development Report (UNDP, [2013](#), pp. 11–13) highlighted how the transfer of global wealth and power from the North to the South is historically unprecedented in speed and scale. After leaving office, former president Bill Clinton said that as the top dog in the world, the US faced a fundamental choice. It could make every effort to stay top dog. Or it could use its unchallengeable dominance to create a world in which it was comfortable living when no longer top dog.[1] The evidence suggests that Washington chose the first through a military doctrine based on overwhelming force and global strike capability that would deny any adversary the ability to resist US firepower. But a wise Washington would have chosen the second course to build legal frameworks and political institutions of cooperation, from Eastern Europe through the Middle East to Asia–Pacific (Benedict,[2014](#)).

### **US double standards**

Responding to the decision by the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa – the G-group that is most symbolic of the shifting global order) at their 2014 summit in Fortaleza, Brazil to set up their own New Development Bank (Thakur,[2014b](#)), the *Financial Times* ([2014b](#)) argued: 'if non-western nations decide that the west is abusing its institutional power – by, for example, bugging internet traffic, imposing arbitrary economic sanctions or abusing the courts – they will feel much more motivated to set up alternative institutions, and to redirect

the wiring of the global governance system, so that it no longer runs through the west'. Washington's arbitrary and selective efforts to enforce the rule of law is indeed stimulating the search for alternative institutional designs by key rising powers. 'The goal of the emerging countries is clear – to change the global order with the United States as the hegemonic power' (Prange,[2014](#); see also Luce,[2014](#)). Washington's recent attempts to browbeat China, India and Russia with respect to cyber-espionage, maritime territorial disputes, domestic US visa and labour laws, international human rights law, and respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine (all within six months of one another), fail the rule of law test: 'a principle of governance in which all... are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated' (Annan,[2004](#)).

As with national and global surveillance, Americans have fallen into the trap of interfering anywhere and everywhere not because it is right in principle or serves a coherent strategic purpose, but because they can, insensitive and indifferent to how threatening or offensive their actions are to others. Apropos of the Melian Dialogue, as some among the others gain in relative power, Washington's capacity to brush off their concerns diminishes. The West is losing its ability to impose its will, policy preferences, values and double standards on the rest who are demanding their rightful due in setting the standards, writing the rules and designing and controlling the institutions of global governance to ensure compliance. The new structures of cooperation and/or conflict will depend as much on how Western leaders readjust psychologically to their loss as on the new powers accepting the burdens of global leadership.

While Americans see their policy as springing from universal idealism, many others

perceive it as rooted in sanctimonious arrogance. An Asian human rights activist expressed the cynical belief that 'American democracy requires the repression of democracy in the rest of the world' (quoted in Goldfarb, 2002). Two American professors argued that the George W. Bush administration produced a 'startling loss of legitimacy': the world 'now sees the United States increasingly as an outlier – invoking international law when convenient, and ignoring it when not; using international institutions when they work to its advantage, and disdaining them when they pose obstacles to US designs' (Tucker and Hendrickson, 2004, pp. 23, 32). US drone strikes in the Afghanistan–Pakistan badlands and Yemen violate international law, international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and perhaps even US constitutional law (IHRCRC, 2012). Their legality has been sharply questioned by UN Special Rapporteurs Philip Alston (2010), Ben Emmerson (Judd, 2012), and Christof Heyns (Bowcott, 2012); by Louise Arbour (2012), the former special prosecutor at The Hague, a Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; and her successor in the last post Navi Pillay (Boone, 2012). Russia's President Vladimir Putin (2014) mocked the US charge that Russia had violated international law by annexing Crimea: 'It's a good thing that they at least remember there exists such a thing as international law'.

In a Chatham House study of elite perceptions, in contrast to Europeans who emphasised America's historical 'moral leadership', the US is viewed by many Asian elites as hypocritical, overbearing, arrogant and disinterested in others' interests, aggressively pushing its own policy priorities instead (Dormandy, 2014). The disconnect between words and deeds leads the US into trouble abroad and produces foreign policy outcomes that can politely be described as an

incoherent mess. When Egypt's first freely elected president was deposed by the military after mass protests in 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry said the army was 'restoring democracy' (Gordon and Fahim, 2013). When the Thai military took power through a coup in May 2014, also after sustained mass demonstrations and political instability, Kerry (2014) insisted there was 'no justification for this military coup', and US military assistance was suspended until all political detainees are released and fresh elections held. In Ukraine the West supported street mobs who ousted the elected pro-Russian president and installed a pro-Western government instead.

The post-Cold War era of US unipolar ascendancy tempted Washington into adopting such discrepant policies and also enabled it to get away with the normative dissonance. That era has passed. Dimitri Simes (2003, p. 91) described the US as 'a nascent imperial power'. America's imperium is rapidly fading. The demonstration of the limits to NATO power in Iraq and Afghanistan left many less fearful of 'superior' Western power. Abusive practices in the 'war on terror' and the great financial collapse diminished their respect for Western values and management competence. As China, India and Brazil emerge as important growth centres in the world economy and Russia recovers from the trough of the Boris Yeltsin period, the age of the West disrespecting the rest's role, relevance and voice is passing. As part of this global moral rebalancing, Westerners have lost their previous capacity to set rules of behaviour for the world and impose double standards by exempting themselves from these 'global' norms. Either the US must dial back its hostile criticisms of other countries' departures from global norms and international law, backed by threats of diplomatic censure and economic sanctions and hints of military force if ill-defined or carelessly drawn red lines are crossed. Or else the US must bridge the wide reality-

rhetoric gap between its own pronouncements and actions.

## China

Against this wider backdrop, the US is now encountering pushback from the emerging powers. The China–US relationship will be the pivot of the emerging world order. In purchasing power parity dollars, China's economy is on the verge of surpassing the US. It's hard to dispute the claim that even since Obama's announcement of the US pivot to Asia in November 2011, China's relative gain against US primacy in the Pacific has continued apace.

On 19 May, Attorney General Eric Holder announced a grand jury had laid cyber-espionage charges against five Chinese army officers. Beijing denounced the charges as hypocritical: 'The US's deceitful nature and its practice of double standards when it comes to cyber security have long been exposed, from the WikiLeaks incident to the Edward Snowden affair' (BBC, [2014a](#)). The US National Security Agency's global surveillance programs have periodically run 'contrary to the spirit, if not the letter, of the U.S. Constitution and international law' (Rothkopf, [2014](#)). Because of the global scale of its surveillance program, the US forfeited the sympathy of most other countries on the issue, including Brazil, a fourth BRICS country. Angered by revelations that in addition to citizens being spied on, her personal phone calls and emails had been intercepted by the NSA, President Dilma Rousseff lambasted US surveillance as a violation of international law and a 'totally unacceptable' infringement of Brazil's sovereignty. She became the first leader to cancel a state dinner hosted by the US president (Trotta, [2013](#)).

In 2013, Manila took Beijing to international arbitration over their South China Sea dispute. Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt

comments that, having studied how US hegemonic behaviour that 'blatantly violates international law when it's in its interest', China concluded this is 'what first-class powers do' (Himmelman, [2013](#)). At the Shangri-la Dialogue on 31 May, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel accused China of destabilising the South China Sea and warned that Washington would 'not look the other way' when nations ignored international rules. Chinese Lt.-Gen. Wang Guanzhong responded that Hagel's speech was 'full of hegemony, full of words of threat and intimidation' (O'Malley, [2014](#)).

## India

The developing Russia–China–India axis may not be an axis of evil nor a military alliance, 'but it is committed to subverting US hegemonic power' (Boyes, [2014](#)). Kissinger (1964, pp. 206–07) notes that 'the most fundamental problem of politics ... is not the control of wickedness but the limitation of righteousness'. While punishment of the wicked is 'relatively simple', to 'restrain the exercise of righteous power is more difficult'. India's deputy consul-general in New York Devyani Khobragade was arrested and strip-searched on 12 December 2013 for alleged violations of US visa and labour laws in connection with her maid. The controversy highlighted many pathologies of India's 'VIP culture' (Thakur, [2013a](#)). But treating the accredited Indian official as a human trafficker and subjecting her to degrading treatment provoked a full-fledged public spat between the two self-righteous countries. The affair threw up three legal questions: should international law prevail over domestic law; which country's labour laws have priority in multiple jurisdictions; and which country's laws and judicial process should have primacy (Thakur, [2013b](#))? The case, involving a contract signed in India between two Indian citizens with the government as an interested third party (the maid held an official Indian

passport), was already before India's courts and US authorities inserted the US legal jurisdiction over India's judiciary.

The US muscularly shields its diplomats, even when they kill. In the age of Internet and social media, such instances are quickly retrieved and flashed around the world. In August 2013 Joshua Walde, a US diplomat stationed in Kenya, ploughed head-on into a full mini-bus; US embassy officials rushed him out of Kenya the next day (Straziuso, [2013](#)). In 2011 Raymond Davis, a CIA contractor in Lahore, shot and killed two Pakistanis. He was brought home a free man after paying blood money. Then-Senator John Kerry ([2011](#)) went to Pakistan to appease its anger and said: 'this case does not belong in the court' because Davis 'has diplomatic immunity'. President Obama insisted on diplomatic immunity for Davis but stayed studiously silent on Khobragade, as did now-Secretary of State Kerry. A bitterly angry India transferred Khobragade to its UN mission which got her full diplomatic status, and then brought her back to New Delhi where she remains on active duty. India withdrew courtesies beyond the strict requirements of the Vienna Conventions that had been extended to US diplomats and consular officials in India. Says widely respected Singaporean diplomat-scholar Kishore Mahbubani ([2014](#)), 'virtually every other government in the world was quietly cheering on the Indian government as it insisted on total reciprocity in the treatment of Indian and American officials'.

Americans were taken aback by the strength of the Indian reaction. The issue resonated with most Indian diplomats who take their own domestic staff on foreign postings. Almost the entire elite Indian foreign service – the permanent custodian of India's permanent interests – was antagonised in a country where the bureaucracy is more powerful than in Western democracies. The

incident touched a raw nerve in Hindu society. One of the most celebrated accounts in the Mahabharat – one of the two founding epics of Hinduism – is the [cheerharan](#) incident, where the evil Kaurava dynasty compels [Draupadi](#), wife of the rival claimants to the throne, to be disrobed in open court in order to humiliate her publicly. (Lord Krishna comes to her rescue by extending her sari limitlessly.) An analogue of rape as power, stripping a woman naked and parading her up and down the main village street is still a common form of asserting control and exercising power by the upper castes in order to put the lower castes and outcastes in their allotted place in the social order – and Khobragade belongs to the lower castes. This is why the whole country was in uproar at Khobragade's treatment and why the National Security Adviser publicly described her treatment by US arresting officers as barbaric and uncivilised.

Almost immediately Washington confronted its next India headache. In 2005 the head of Gujarat's government Narendra Modi had his US visa revoked because of alleged complicity in the state's 2002 anti-Muslim riots. This was a spectacular own goal from the Bush administration which endorsed torture as official policy and was responsible for an illegal war of aggression that caused the death and displacement of millions of Iraqis. Modi was the elected head of government of a well-run state, was never charged with any crime, and independent judicial probes exonerated him. Modi was the only person ever to have been placed on the US prohibited watch-list of someone promoting religious intolerance. It is difficult to see how Gujarat under Modi was more intolerant of minority religions than Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki who was honoured in Washington by two presidents – the same two who kept Modi out ([Zakaria, 2014](#)). China took advantage of the US and European

boycott of Modi to welcome him on several official visits and treated him almost like a visiting head of government.

After the 2014 Indian election, Washington began a diplomatic minuet of reaching out to the previously untouchable Modi and invited him to the US for bilateral discussions with Obama after his address to the UN in September. On the eve of the visit, the Federal Court of Southern District of New York issued a summons to him in connection with the 2002 Gujarat riots, in response to a complaint by two plaintiffs seeking punitive and compensatory damages. The legal basis of the case is the Alien Tort Statute of 1789 (Lakshman and Haidar, [2014](#)). The online comments from Indians was one of total incredulity that a US court would entertain a case concerning an incident in a foreign country. (In the event, as a visiting head of government Modi was deemed to be protected by immunity from the court summons.) Yet, in a further illustration of the central argument of this article, US courts reject relief for foreigners subjected to abuse by US officials in US jurisdictions. Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen, was arrested in September 2002 while transiting through New York as an international passenger, renditioned to Syria to be tortured by the same regime that the US now condemns, and ultimately paid \$10mn by the Canadian government in reparation. But US courts refused to touch his case against US authorities.[2]

### **Russia and Ukraine**

In the dominant Western narrative, including Obama's UN address (Obama, [2014b](#)), Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich was removed in a genuinely popular revolution. Russia annexed Crimea out of pique and in pursuit of Putin's longstanding ambition to resurrect something like the Soviet Union. Next up would be eastern Ukraine, with its largely Russian-speaking and eastern-

oriented population, and then Moldova – perhaps even the Baltic states and Poland. But Russia saw Yanukovich's departure as the result of an illegal coup, orchestrated by dangerous rightwing nationalist elements and supported by interfering European and US officials driven by the goal to claim Ukraine for the west at Russia's expense (Karaganov, [2014b](#); Saunders, [2014](#); Trenin, [2014](#)). Veteran Russian diplomat and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov ([2014](#)) explained Russia's actions as a cornered response to Western military, political and economic expansion right up to Russia's borders, and several US scholars and political commentators agreed (Mearsheimer, [2014](#); Buchanan, [2014](#); Cohen, [2014b](#); Pillar, [2014](#); Newton-Small, [2014](#); Heuvel and Cohen, [2014](#); Pfaff, [2014](#); Milne, [2014b](#)). A Russian university dean wrote the West 'made a potential foe out of what was once an aspiring ally' (Karaganov, [2014c](#)).

### **Normative inconsistency**

The US and European policies on Ukraine are riddled with double standards normatively and are also strategically-challenged. Between January 2012 and June 2014, the Obama administration was overruled, *unanimously*, on thirteen cases by the Supreme Court (Fund, [2014](#)). It would seem reasonable to infer that the administration's judgment of its expansive power on foreign policy is also likely to have some serious flaws. In a jaw-dropping interview on 2 March, Kerry declared that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you cannot just invade countries on a 'completely trumped-up pretext' (Dunham, [2014](#)). The US in 2003 did exactly that in Iraq, without the excuse of vital security interests being under threat from a country on the other side of the world. Kerry himself voted for that war (having voted against the fully justified Gulf War I).

In 1962, Cuba was a sovereign state that entered into an agreement with the then

Soviet Union for stationing missiles on its territory. This was interpreted, correctly, as a hostile act directed at the US mainland. The resulting crisis, which risked a nuclear war, was resolved with the withdrawal of Soviet missiles. It is inconsistent with that precedent to insist that the Eastern European countries as sovereign states must be conceded the right to enter into a defence alliance with the US and to station NATO troops and missiles on their territory regardless of the threat this poses to Russia's national security.

In 1999, NATO bombed Serbia into submission on Kosovo's secession. Today NATO demands Crimea be handed back to Ukraine. Part of Russia since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Crimea was 'gifted' to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 without consulting its people. The Russians annexed it this year after a referendum of dubious legality and accuracy. Calls for a genuinely democratic referendum to determine and respect the people's choice would be understandable. But those who used military force to dismember Serbia have little moral authority to insist Crimea must be returned to Ukraine regardless of its people's wishes: 'Attempts by those who staged the secession of Kosovo from Serbia ... to question the free will of Crimeans cannot be viewed as anything but a flagrant display of double standards' (Lavrov, [2014](#)). Unlike 'the well-known Kosovo precedent', where NATO used deadly force without UN authorisation or treaty agreement with the host state, Russian actions had not involved any firefight or human casualty at all. Pointedly saying that 'we remember 1999 very well', Putin ([2014](#)) declared: 'This is not even double standards; this is ... blunt cynicism'.

The West may bankroll and support destabilisation of an elected pro-Russian government in Kiev, but Russia must not destabilise a pro-west government installed by coup on its doorstep. At the same time as

Washington demanded a cessation of Russian arms supplies to pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine, the US restocked Israel's dwindling ammunition supplies from waging an offensive war in Gaza (Reuters, [2014](#)). In 1988, Iran Air Flight 655 was shot down by USS *Vincennes* – not a client but a US ship – killing 290 people. The ship's captain was neither rebuked nor punished but awarded a medal (Kaplan, defence correspondent of *The Boston Globe* at the time, [2014](#)), yet the West demands consequences for Russia for the MH17 accident allegedly shot down by pro-Russian rebels with Russian-supplied missiles.

### **Strategic folly**

If it is acceptable for the US to use force unilaterally to protect core interests, as per Obama's statement at the start of this article, it's hard to see how the Russian annexation of contiguous Crimea – a core Russian interest – is less justified than the US use of force in Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003, half a world away.[3] From Russia's perspective, the West's policies after the end of the Cold War intentionally sought to weaken, diminish and provoke Russia in its immediate vicinity; that is, in its irreducible sphere of interest if Russia is to survive as a power of any consequence. The reliability of promises is as important a diplomatic tool as the credibility of threats. NATO's relentless eastward expansion into parts of the former Soviet empire, with talk of expanding it even farther east to Ukraine and Georgia, broke US promises to Mikhail Gorbachev on the basis of which he had peacefully withdrawn Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, permitted Germany's reunification, and even accepted united Germany as a member of NATO (Shifrinson, [2014](#)).

Western countries, 'despite repeated assurances to the contrary, have carried out successive waves of Nato enlargement' and 'moved the alliance's military infrastructure



eastward', complained Lavrov ([2014](#)). As NATO's expansion crept ever-closer to Russia's heartland, Moscow was going to feel cornered and push back some day, somewhere. Ukraine in 2014 proved to be the place and the time: 'When calls for reason proved powerless to stop Nato's expansion, Russia halted it instead with an iron fist' (Karaganov,[2014a](#)). Moreover, NATO includes France and Germany. Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine, has been the geographical gateway for some horrific invasions of Russia in European history, including by Napoleon and Hitler.

Putin has described the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the last century's greatest geopolitical disaster. He had watched helplessly as Russia was looted by oligarchs abetted by US crony capitalists, millions of ethnic Russians were abandoned and relegated to second class status in former Soviet republics, NATO moved in to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of Russian troops from central and eastern Europe, and Russian voice, vote and interests were brushed aside in detaching Kosovo from Serbia. Not surprisingly, a resentful Russia nursed a grievance and reacted like a great power when a coup was engineered in its front garden to oust a democratically elected leader because he is pro-Russian (Gessen,[2014](#)).

Undertaken with little strategic hindsight or foresight, NATO's numerical, territorial and mission creep progressively alienated Russia, encouraged recklessness by some East European states and put NATO credibility on the line – without making it stronger. Ukraine coming under NATO coverage would be a strategic catastrophe for Russia: NATO would be just 250 miles from Moscow, and Sevastopol in Crimea is the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea Fleet whose loss would cut off naval access to the Mediterranean and squeeze Russia out of the Caucasus. It is

better for Russia to fight NATO before further impoverishment with Ukraine cut off economically and the military balance worsened. Even if Russia is defeated, the costs of victory for the West will be substantially higher – a lesson learnt by many potential targets of US military attention by the fates of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi.

In November 2013, Europe forced Yanukovich to choose between joining the Eurasian Economic Union – a Moscow-led customs union opposed by Washington as a ploy to re-Sovietise the region – or a free trade and association pact with the EU. Putin was prepared to accept Ukraine choosing both. Yanukovich tried to play off Moscow against Brussels, over-reached, and ended up accepting the more generous \$15 billion Russian aid package. The West then moved in swiftly to destabilise his regime with the help of nationalist, far right and neo-Nazi groups in Kiev and western Ukraine,[4] at the culmination of which, 'power in Kiev was seized undemocratically, through violent street protests conducted with the direct participation of ministers and other officials from the US and EU countries' (Lavrov,[2014](#)).

The Bush era saw America expend much blood and treasure in the Iraq war, only to deliver the country strategically to Iran. Will Obama be midwife to the delivery of Russia to China (Simes,[2014a](#),[2014b](#); Migranyan,[2014b](#))? Overturning the brilliance of the Kissinger–Nixon rapprochement with Mao Zedong, now China exploits the Russia–US wedge. In May 2014, Putin signed a gas deal in Beijing to make China the second biggest market for Russian gas after Germany (Escobar, [2014](#); Gvosdev, [2014](#); Bershidsky,[2014](#)).

Any solution must factor in Russia's legitimate security interests and recognise that Ukraine is neither Russian nor European but deeply divided between them and

dependent on both. However the Ukraine crisis is finally resolved, and regardless of which side capitulates and which prevails, economic and political reconstruction on the day after will require cooperation at best, or at least tolerance of each other's interests by the West and Russia (Saunders,2014). Kissinger's realpolitik-based policy of dialogue with Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet Union – stronger, more menacing and more nettlesome than Putin's Russia today – diminished global tensions through détente. NATO's eastward expansion and loose rhetoric from the US president and secretary of state about Russia not being a player of any consequence, and being made to pay for its actions in protecting its core interests in eastern Ukraine and the Crimea, have stoked global tensions. For the foreseeable future, Europe and the US cannot manage world order challenges 'without a working relationship with Russia' (Taylor,2014). This is why realists like Henry Kissinger (2014), John Mearsheimer (2014), and Stephen Walt (2014) recommended a solution that acknowledges and respects Russia's core strategic interests with a united but neutral Ukraine as a buffer, a federal system with regional autonomy, and guaranteed minority rights for all groups.

In the eyes of the rest, the West has treated Russia with contempt born of victor's arrogance. The reassertion of Western exceptionalism carries significant implications for the rising powers. The West's addiction to sanctions provides a powerful incentive to countries like the BRICS to develop long-term alternative financial institutions for parking their money and moving them internationally. Looking at the world from a BRICS-centric lens, all efforts to use US–EU dominance of the international financial system as a lever against another major actor will deepen others' perceptions of the US-centric financial order as a security threat. A *Guardian* columnist comments: 'Russia's counterweight

to US imperial expansion is welcomed, from China to Brazil' (Milne,2014a). According to India's former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal (2014), 'the West's bullying instincts' based on 'unbridled self-righteousness and arrogance' must be countered by the rising countries by building their own political, economic and security networks.

### **Western media**

An essential element of US global sway has been its soft power. A crucial component of US soft power that both expanded behind US military and economic dominance, and in turn helped to reinforce the position of the United States as the unrivalled power of the last several decades, has been the powerful and influential US media. However, by remaining inward-focused in values, orientation and worldviews, the giants of the US media will steadily lose touch with the rest of the world and miss out on the most likely sites of market growth. This risk will be doubled if they should come to be seen as irremediably biased against the rest of the world.[5] The growing loss of US media credibility will in turn translate into a corresponding erosion of US soft power.

The vulnerability of the US media to government manipulation of facts, evidence and opinion was vividly brought home in the lead-up to the Iraq war when they failed to challenge the inflated threat assessment by the Bush administration based on demonstrably inadequate, incomplete and distorted evidence, self-serving selective intelligence, and flawed analysis. Similarly, Obama's advisers looking to the opinion pages of the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* for how to handle the Ukraine crisis is comparable to leafing through 'the latest *Victoria's Secret* catalog for guidance on empowering women' (Bacevich,2014). One of the leading US authorities on Russia laments the 'tsunami of shamefully unprofessional and politically inflammatory

articles in leading newspapers and magazines' on Russia, and the 'relentless demonization of Putin, with little regard for facts' (Cohen,[2014a](#)).

The mainstream media ignored the well-documented and even televised outbreaks of anarchic violence and the explosion of anti-Semitic slogans in Kiev and western Ukraine (Cohen,[2014c](#)). Nor did they describe and explain the sense of Russians' grievance about how they have been treated by the West since the Cold War (Migranyan,[2014a](#)). Notes Brendan O'Neill ([2014](#)), editor of the online journal *Spiked*: 'The Western coverage of Ukraine has given new meaning to the phrase double standards'. A particularly disgraceful example was a map of the conflict region in *The Economist*([2014b](#)) which depicted a menacing red Russian bear about to swallow up Ukraine.

In their coverage of the two Indian cases discussed above, the mainstream Western media published several comments and editorials critical of India, which is fine (with one exception noted below) as everyone is entitled to their view, but none that presented the Indian point of view, which is harder to justify. In the Khobragade case, this was true of the *Washington Post* ([2014](#); Sharma,[2013](#); Vandenberg, [2014](#)), *New York Times* ([2013](#), [2014](#); Bhattacharya,[2013](#)), *Guardian* (Deo,[2013](#)), and *Financial Times* ([2014a](#); Luce,[2013](#)). None saw fit to inquire why Indians had massively sided with the diplomat contrary to normal instincts to back the poor manual workers against the rich and privileged elite. Indians seemed to think it more likely the maid had duped gullible Americans – predisposed to believe stories of employer abuse – to game the system to secure government assisted family migration to the US. On Modi, *The Economist* ([2014a](#)) recounted the horror story of Gujarat's 2002 riots, condemned him as 'a man still associated with sectarian hatred', and

endorsed the Rahul Gandhi-led Congress as the lesser evil, despite his lack of executive experience, his party's populist policies, his only claim to leadership being dynastic, and the complicity of senior Congress Party leaders in the murderous anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984 that killed around 3,000 people: all in opposition to the magazine's core philosophical principles.

In an article in *The Guardian*, Jayati Ghosh ([2014](#)) of Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi vented her anger at the election of Modi, attributing it essentially to a marketing success using 'a massively funded and aggressive media campaign'. Modi's 'role in the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat may not yet have been punished by the Indian courts... but his culpability ... is still evident'. 'The 'communal peace' that has supposedly prevailed in Gujarat ... has been achieved ... essentially by terrorising [Muslims] into submission'. This is so tendentious it's hard to see the justification for any respectable paper to publish it, other than it fits their pre-existing narrative. The prevailing sentiment in India was the voters have shown maturity in rejecting the failed and discredited politics of dynasty, dependency, caste and religious identity, entitlement, and stagnation in economic growth and job creation (Thakur,[2014b](#)).

At the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, Hagel warned China: 'We firmly oppose any nation's use of intimidation, coercion, or the threat of force to assert these claims' (BBC,[2014b](#)). The BBC news item attracted a total of 902 online comments. The 20 top-rated comments were uniformly anti-US, noting that the worst offender in the tactics of intimidation, coercion and the threat and use of force to destabilise other countries and regions 'all over the world' has been the US. One said simply: 'Pot. Kettle. Black'. Another pointed out 'this is not April 1<sup>st</sup>'. Some remarked Hagel's comment was further proof

that 'Americans don't get irony'. One commented 'The land of hypocrisy strikes again'.

The world is more connected than ever before but Western mainstream media commentators are remarkably disconnected from the rest of the world whose citizens, in an indictment of the US/Western media's professional integrity, are quick to detect and deride Western hypocrisy. Far from convincing the rest, Western media is losing credibility with the rest with its inbuilt biases.

### **Conclusion**

As this article has shown Washington, including the Obama administration, is much keener to enforce global norms on others than to observe them itself. That the declining hegemon picked quarrels based in double standards of international law and norms with three BRICS heavyweights within six months should cause concern and promote honest introspection in Washington. In all three cases discussed in this article, the country concerned has pushed back. In all, there was a serious imbalance between the core interests of the other country and US interests or value goals. In the case of China and Russia, when added to contiguity, these made the threats of using force if necessary credible. In both instances, the military imbalance is such that the US would ultimately prevail in any outright war, but because of the incidental interests, the gains of victory would not compensate for the price paid. For China, India and Russia, the damage to core national interests from any further appeasement of Washington was judged to be greater than the costs of escalating the dispute. For the US, however, under the law of diminishing returns, the costs of each escalation step steadily mount in excess of gains.

In all three cases, the US held others to standards of domestic or international law that it demonstrably ignores or violates itself,

and tried to impose costs for their transgressions that it has refused to pay itself. To return to Thucydides' Melian Dialogue, after the end of the Cold War, the US had no equal in power to worry much about justice and right. Unchallengeable primacy had enabled Washington to brush aside criticisms of double standards: it did what it could and others suffered as they had to. This is going to become progressively more difficult as US primacy is increasingly contested by the rising powers. If you throw your weight around, the risk of self-harm grows as your weight reduces and others' increases.

Today the US must confront three choices. It can downgrade the importance of and ignore laws and norms, basing actions on material interests and relative power. This would rob Washington of the means and right to challenge the behaviour of others on normative standards as well. In this case, the US should first decide on the central organising principle of relations with key actors, including China, India and Russia, and formulate its policies on specific issues accordingly. If Russia is returning to a condition of power rivalry, relations with both Moscow plus Europe and China must be restructured accordingly. Alternatively, if the main strategic rival in the emerging and as yet inchoate global order is China, the mutual adjustments and accommodations with Russia that recognise its vital and legitimate interests inside and in the immediate vicinity of Russia (its near abroad) would make more sense, to reduce the prospects of a Beijing–Moscow anti-West axis. In neither case does it make strategic sense to antagonise and alienate India on inconsequential issues.

The second option is the opposite one of elevating the importance of laws and norms even at the cost of immediate material interests, on the reasoning that such a world is in the longer-term US enlightened interest

when the US is no longer the dominant power.

The final choice is to retain the flexibility to judge and sanction others' departures from those norms that the US is able to meet. When others violate norms that are too difficult for the US itself to follow, however, responses should be dictated by a calculation of relative strategic interests and stakes, not abstract standards of behaviour. This is especially so because there will be still be many issues on which the major powers can collaborate to mutual benefit, including climate change, nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, global pandemics, financial crises, etc.

*A former UN Assistant Secretary-General, Ramesh Thakur is Professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy, the Australian National University. Editor-in-Chief of Global Governance, he is co-editor of The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy and author of Nuclear Weapons and International Security: Collected Essays (Routledge, forthcoming).*

## Endnotes

1. At a private function in Los Angeles in October 2002, as quoted by someone present (Evans, [2013](#)).
2. 'The Supreme Court's refusal to consider the claims of Maher Arar, an innocent Canadian who was sent to Syria to be tortured in 2002, was a bitterly disappointing abdication of its duty to hold officials accountable for illegal acts. The Bush administration sent Mr. Arar to outsourced torment, but it was the Obama administration

that urged this course of inaction' (*New York Times*, [2010](#)).

3. By John Pilger's count, (Pilger, [2014](#)) the US has attempted the overthrow of more than 50 governments since 1945, many of them democratically elected, and interfered in the elections in 30 countries.
4. Most mainstream US commentators either ignored or downplayed the right extremism of the anti-Russian agitators in Kiev (Cohen, [2014c](#)).
5. This is not to imply that the media in the three countries covered in this article are less biased. Indeed in this author's judgment in all three, the media are markedly worse when it comes to professional journalistic standards of competence, integrity and objectivity free of jingoistic bias. But this essay is about the Western media, and the demonstrable bias in their coverage provides an all too easy alibi to deny the distorting effects of shortcomings in the media of the other three countries.

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