

A Warning From Putin and Schröder

By Josef Joffe

FHAMBURG, Germany or the “last remaining superpower,” it is time to ask the Ed Koch question, “How am I doing?” The answer is, “O.K., but not great.”

Ten years after victory in the cold war, the United States is still No. 1 by any conceivable measure. But the lesser actors — Russia, Europe, China — are beginning to make true what history and political theory have predicted all along: Great power will generate “ganging up.” Nos. 2, 3 and 4 will seek to balance against Mr. Big.

Just last week, President Vladimir Putin of Russia swept into Berlin, where he deftly executed a classic gambit of Muscovite diplomacy. This is the age-old attempt to forge privileged relations with Germany, the traditional holder of the European balance. He wooed, and he won. “Germany,” Mr. Putin intoned, “is Russia’s leading partner in Europe and the world.” Chancellor Gerhard Schröder cooed back; he, too, was all for a “strategic partnership” with Russia.

One motive is obvious. Both Europe and Russia intensely dislike the American missile defense project, and for good reasons. If it works (which it won’t for many years, if ever), the “Son of Star Wars” will further magnify American dominance by devaluing the nuclear arsenals of Russia, China and Europe. No wonder Mr. Putin and Mr. Schröder together trained their guns on the anti-missile bubble in the sky.

The more general thrust is obvious, too. The purpose is not to resume the old game of the 18th and 19th centuries, which was to harness alliances or even go to war to lay low the hegemonist du jour. It is to contain and constrain what the lesser powers see as excessive clout on the part of No. 1.

In the past, the United States was rarely mentioned by name. Russians and Chinese kept inveighing against

a “unipolar world” and a “single model of culture.” The enemy was “hegemonism” and “repeated imposition” by you-know-who. Now, as usual, it is the French who thunder where others grumble. Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine likes to call the United States a “hyperpower” given to “unilateralist temptation” because “there is no counterweight.”

Last week, the European Union’s external affairs commissioner, Chris Patten, made it explicit: Europe had to grow into a “serious counterpart” to the United States. In fact, that process is well under way. According to the German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, monetary union, begun in 1999, was an “eminently political act” by which Europe had “opted for an autonomous path.” Shamed by its impotence in the Kosovo bombing, the European Union last December vowed to field an intervention force of 60,000 capable of slugging it out without the United States.

None of this should come as a surprise. Subtly and cautiously, the lesser players are acting out the oldest game of nations. Primacy provokes, and power begets power. What is No. 1 to do?

The most critical item is a change of consciousness. America is so far ahead of the crowd that it has forgotten to look back. Yes, the president and his minions are diligently working the global diplomatic circuit. Public opinion, as the surveys keep demonstrating, remains internationalist. But Congress has come down a long way from the days of Senators Arthur Vandenberg and J. William Fulbright. Now, it is obliviousness with a dollop of yahooism. Why else would Congress have foisted Star Wars, the Sequel on President Clinton — without looking at the feasibility (low), the costs (very high) and the toll on American leadership (soaring).

Sure, when you are eyeing that megamerger or I.P.O. bulging with zillions, the rest of the world looks both boring and ornery. But this world — this wondrous system of open trade and collective defense that the United

States built in the 1950’s — won’t manage itself. Nor will it long withstand America’s unilateralist reflexes like the missile defense system or the micromanagement of the Kosovo war by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Obsessive second-guessing by the brass back in Washington not only riled European souls, but also humiliated the NATO commander at the time, Wesley Clark, who happens to be an American. Why stick to the alliance if it becomes a wholly owned subsidiary of the Pentagon?

One assumes that the “last remaining superpower” will want to remain one. But if so, the United States might recall the best tradition of its postwar grand strategy. It wasn’t just sheer size and weight that shaped this most brilliant chapter of American diplomacy. It was the bipartisan conviction that power comes with responsibility, and that responsibility must defy short-term self-interest or the domestic fixation of the day.

Hence that marvelous alphabet soup of international institutions from NATO to GATT and the I.M.F. that turned America into the “indispensable power” celebrated by Madeleine Albright. Why? Because this No. 1 was the first in history to lead rather than rule. Others followed because the United States was a supply-side hegemon — it provided the world with essential public goods like stability and free trade.

To heed the needs (and sensibilities) of others is the best defense against “ganging up,” and that is as true in domestic as in international politics. Great leaders shun both imposition and indifference.

The proper maxim for Mr. Big is: “Do good by others to do well for yourself.” Great powers remain great if they promote their own interests by serving those of others. □
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