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Globe editorial: The tragedy of Aleppo, and the end of a one superpower world

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Some called it the Unipolar Moment: The world suddenly had only one superpower. The Soviet Bloc was gone; China was still weak and poor. The Western liberal and democratic order was triumphant to such a degree that when Westerners invoked "the international community," they instinctively assumed it reflected their views on government and human rights.

A generation later, the Unipolar Moment is over. It's hard to say exactly when it died, but December 14, 2016 in Aleppo, Syria, is as good a time and place as any to put on the death certificate.

This week in Aleppo, a dictatorship militarily backed by Moscow, Tehran, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias completed its destruction of Syria's largest city, while American United Nations Ambassador Samantha Power pitifully pleaded with the perpetrators to feel some shame.

In the West, there is widespread outrage about what is happening in Syria. There should be. This week's carnage is just the latest horror in a war that has killed hundreds of thousands, while creating millions of refugees. There is a sense in the West that this disaster is also a failure on our part – that it is the responsibility of the West, and above all Washington, to stop the Assad regime, and to somehow do... something.

We have all become accustomed to a unipolar world, where the one superpower can be called on to oust or curb brutal regimes for their brutality, or face condemnation if it fails to do so. We forget how unusual is the air we have recently been breathing.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, great powers had spheres of influence, and crossing the lines risked bloodshed on a massive scale. When the Soviets crushed Hungary in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968, the Western world roundly condemned it. But NATO did not consider militarily challenging Moscow's control of its satellite states, as this would have involved starting World War III.

After 1989, everything changed. Consider one popular idea from the Unipolar Moment: the Canadian-backed notion called Responsibility to Protect, or R2P.

Advocated by leaders like former external affairs minister Lloyd Axworthy, R2P called on the international community to intervene, with military force, to defend people around the globe against human-rights abuses by their own governments. National sovereignty could be trumped by human rights, and the responsibility to protect might even trump the UN Security Council vetoes of Russia or China. When the Syrian civil war began, the idea of R2P was immediately invoked to call the world to action, and with good reason.

Responsibility to protect is a noble idea: that humanity should stop regimes from abusing their own people, even forcibly removing the worst abusers. But its exercise assumes a unipolar world, in which there is an unchallenged superpower that is liberal-minded and willing to forcibly impose its ideas on recalcitrant regimes. Ironically, the favourite foreign policy of early 2000s Liberal Canada was built on the assumption of global American hegemony.

For all its lack of realism, R2P is a better vision for the world than the one Eastern Europe's captive peoples had to submit to during the Cold War. Those stuck behind The Wall had only two choices: escape or endure. Ditto for those suffering life in other dictatorial lands.

In 1982, Bashar al-Assad's father faced a revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama. He besieged and flattened the city, killing thousands. There was no talk of a Western invasion. In addition to the fact that the rebels may have been even more anti-American than the regime, intervention would have been seen as too costly, too much outside America's national interest, too likely to backfire, and involving a direct attack on a Soviet client state, to boot.

We may be returning to that earlier, multipolar world. China is now a superpower, and just starting to test its new muscle. Russia is newly aggressive. In the Middle East, regional powers, like Turkey and Iran, have increasing influence – Iran may hold more sway in Syria than any other country. Relatively speaking, America is no longer nearly so powerful as it appeared to be after 1989.

Yes, America can still defeat anyone on the battlefield. But bringing peace and order after military victory is a mystery Washington has yet to solve. Its post-9/11 wars have been heartbreaking, bloody failures.

The Obama administration's reluctance to bomb the Assad regime, or to impose a no-fly zone early in the Syrian Arab Spring revolt, reflects not just a reluctance about risking conflict with Moscow or Tehran. It also reflects America's earlier Middle Eastern disasters. Those calling on America to intervene militarily in a Mideast crisis forget that America's recent Mideast interventions have all ended very badly.

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan at the head of an international coalition and brought about regime change – but, a decade and a half later, Afghanistan is a state of semi-governed chaos, large parts of which are once again controlled by the Islamists America overthrew.

Iraq, nearly 14 years after the American invasion, is less of an American ally and more of an Iranian satellite. Libya, free of Gaddafi, is now a failed state.

And Syria is more complicated than the others. The problem in Syria is not identifying the bad guys: There are so many. To take just one example, the U.S. and Canada are already fighting a war against ISIS. ISIS is also an enemy of Mr. Assad – but also partly his creation.

In Syria, the challenge for Washington and its allies is not whom to oppose. The enemies list is depressingly long. It's whom to support.