

Accelerating Imperial Decline: Trump's America in the World

June 14, 2017



[The following article was written as a contribution to Solidarity's pre-convention discussion.]

Foreign policy elites are freaking out:

"President Trump has accomplished an extraordinary amount in a short time. With shocking speed, he has wreaked havoc: hobbling our core alliances, jettisoning American values and abdicating United States leadership of the world. That's a whole lot of winning — for Russia and China."

Those are the lamentations of Barack Obama's national security advisor and ambassador to the United Nations, Susan E. Rice (*New York Times*, Saturday, June 3, 2017, "To Be Great, America Must Be Good.")

Voicing the fears of wide sectors of globally-oriented thinkers of both the center-left and center-right, Rice cites Trump's withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership, renunciation of human rights (or lip service to values thereof), budget cuts to USAID and the State Department, equivocation on Article 5 (commitment to mutual self-defense) of the NATO treaty, all topped off by withdrawing from the Paris climate accord, "(t)his last, disastrous decision" which Rice calls "the coup de grace for America's global leadership for the foreseeable future..."

"America voluntarily gave up that leadership - because we quit the field...The network of alliances that distinguishes America from other powers and has kept our nation safe and strong for decades is now in jeopardy. We will see the cost when next we need the world to rally to our side."

The landscape of the mainstream "quality" media is littered with similar observations of how the Trump doctrine, to the extent it exists, endangers the "liberal democratic order," forged by the United States, which has created a safe and prosperous post-World War II world. Two observations are in order about this widely-shared elite perspective on the world of the past seventy years and its threatened unraveling.

The first point, of course, is that the "relative stability and peace" of this period is an ideological and

racist fantasy. For Marxists, there is no need to detail here the carnage inflicted on Indochina, the era of military dictatorships in Latin America and genocidal U.S.-backed wars in Guatemala and Honduras, the unending Palestinian tragedy, the murder of Patrice Lumumba leading to decades of unceasing brutality and civil war in the Congo (the center of “Africa’s World War” as described by Gerard Prunier), the depredations of dying French and Portuguese colonialism, murderous “structural adjustment” regimes imposed by U.S.-dominated international financial institutions, CIA-sponsored coups in Iran, Indonesia, Brazil, Greece, Argentina – all this and so much more. “Relative stability” in the rich countries of the global North has been a holocaust for much of the rest of the world.

The second point, however, is that *in its own terms* – that is, from a perspective in which the lives of people and nations in the global South are inherently of secondary and subordinate value – the charge that Trump is endangering a stable world order has validity. In a time of weakening capitalist institutions – a process that we on the revolutionary left naturally don’t regret, but where progressive and working class alternatives are not in place – the incoherence and bizarre twists of Trump’s “America First” policies are accelerants of tendencies toward global chaos with unpredictable consequences.

That Donald Trump is entirely unfit, unprepared and emotionally incompetent to hold any responsible office let alone the U.S. presidency is self-evident and confirmed by his behavior every day. It isn’t necessary to dwell on this. No one knows it better than those immediately around him, the Republican leadership that will cover up for him so long as they see him as an enabler of their savage legislative agenda, Cabinet secretaries like Tillerson and Mattis who must act as designated pooper-scoopers cleaning up behind him, and other global leaders who interact with him.

Dictators from Russia’s Putin to the Gulf kingdoms understand that Trump can be manipulated by extravagant flattery. This has produced bizarre results – the stench of collusion between his campaign and the Russian intelligence/banking/organized crime nexus, the eruption of a major crisis between the Saudi-led axis and Qatar in the immediate wake of Trump’s performance in Riyadh. On the other hand, his embrace of far-right forces like Le Pen and the British UKIP have alienated him from the center-right pillars of the European Union, Macron and Merkel. Trump’s unpredictability and volatility, and the fact that whole layers of the normal foreign-policy apparatus are almost unstaffed, all add to the weakening of U.S. “leadership” at least in the immediate conjuncture.

There is another point to consider here: the low-probability but potentially catastrophic chance that Trump by design or blunder might launch a war with North Korea, or Iran. To be clear, these are highly unlikely events, given the U.S. military leadership’s very acute understanding that these adventures are not “winnable” without risking apocalyptic consequences, and that there would be no strategic “partners.” The very idea, however, is so horrific that it should not be ignored as the outer limit of lunacy.

Stepping back from the daily spectacle that Trump is making of himself and U.S. politics, it’s worth looking at the issues and contradictions that he has inherited and didn’t create, even if he’s making them worse.

Underlying Trends

The status of an unchallengeable “hyperpower” with which the United States emerged in 1991, following the twin events of the first Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) and the collapse of the Soviet Union, was of course inherently temporary. In a triumphal orgy, successive U.S. administrations chose courses that accelerated the erosion of U.S. power by using it more assertively and brazenly than the traffic would bear.”

Post-Soviet Russia would not be flat on its back and humiliated permanently. (Russia's late 1990s recovery on the strength of high oil prices, and its present lapse into severe economic and social crisis with oil around \$50 a barrel, would require an extended separate discussion.) The Clinton administration launched an aggressive, opportunistic and ultimately destabilizing project of expanding NATO to Russia's borders, which was bound to produce an eventual nasty pushback from Moscow.

Contrary to some expectations, the slippage of U.S. "control" did not mean the rise of an alternative superpower nation or bloc. The European Union, for example, at the apparent height of its power and pride, set the stage for its own upheaval with the creation of a common currency without the necessary fiscal union or political solidarity to hold its stronger and weaker partners inside it. In the long run, China would emerge as the only major rising power to rival U.S. supremacy.

In the meantime the George W. Bush-Dick Cheney gang, in the wake of the 9-11 attacks, undertook a "Global War on Terror" whose real aim was the remaking of the Middle East into a vast U.S. oil lake, the ultimate target of which would be Iran. (The Iranian regime's offers to cooperate in defeating the Taliban and al-Qaeda were peremptorily rebuffed by Washington, both after 9-11 and again following the toppling of Saddam Hussein, leading naturally to a hardening of Tehran's attitude. the speedup of its nuclear program, and legitimizing in the eyes of many, Iran's assertion as a "regional power" in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.) The result was the U.S. disaster in Iraq, the rise of "Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia," the strengthening of the Assad regime in Syria, which had been losing strength, and the grinding impasse in Afghanistan.

Barack Obama campaigned on winning the "smart war" in Afghanistan and ending the "dumb war" in Iraq. Eight years and a "troop surge" in Afghanistan later, he was unable to do either. Meanwhile an uncertain U.S. response to the "Arab Spring" in Egypt; an intervention in Libya, launched in the name of preventing an imminent massacre of the population of Benghazi, that grew into a regime-change air war leading to state disintegration and chaos; a partial paralysis of U.S. policy as the repression of popular protests in Syria gave way to the colossal disaster of the civil war in that country; the evolution of "Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia" into the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, were all aspects of a regional meltdown.

To top it off, Obama committed \$38 billion in military subsidies to Israel, sold air power to Saudi Arabia that has facilitated the destruction of Yemen, escalated drone strikes and substituted special forces raids for the introduction of U.S. ground troops. After the hopes his election had raised all over the Middle East, Obama's one solid achievement was the multilateral agreement with Iran to suspend its nuclear weapons program. Thanks to bipartisan Congressional hostility to Iran and eagerness to slap on new sanctions, this deal hasn't produced much of any substantive political opening with Iran aside from some uneasy tactical cooperation on the ground in the war against ISIS around Mosul in Iraq.

Into this maelstrom has walked Donald Trump, an accidental president whose ignorance is overwhelming and whose foreign policy team is way understaffed and distracted by his swirling scandals and twitstorms. In the event of a genuine global emergency, it makes a big difference from the traditional establishment point of view if major strategic allies (and rivals) have no confidence in the competence or stability of the U.S. president and those around him. Certainly on the issue of climate change, Trump has made the United States a pariah country. No wonder then that folks like Susan Rice and so many other prominent operatives, journalists and pundits are concerned.

Theatrical absurdities aside, however, in terms of day-to-day operations in the absence of unanticipated crises, there's as much continuity - perhaps more - than disruption. Contrary to his campaign promises, Trump did not move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and shows no

inclination to do so anytime soon. In the anti-ISIS war, Trump has not sent an invasion force “to take their oil” but has ramped up air strikes and assassination raids – very much as Hillary Clinton would have done, and as president Obama began. The one-time Cruise missile attack on a Syrian air base was inconsequential.

Even in the case of the genuinely dangerous rise in tensions with North Korea, as distinct from Trump’s rhetoric, his *actions* – joint military exercises with South Korea, aircraft carrier movements, beginning deployment of anti-missile technology (stalled by the resistance of the new South Korean government, which doesn’t want it) and heavy diplomatic reliance on China to stem the crisis – aren’t qualitatively different from what we would have seen from a Clinton White House. His call for \$54 billion in increased military spending is “only” \$16 billion more than what President Obama proposed.

There are exceptions. To whatever extent Trump played a deliberate or unwitting role in the eruption of the Saudi-Qatar crisis, this may have serious consequences if not quickly resolved. His threat to reverse Obama’s opening to Cuba is motivated by squalid partisan considerations, and would be both ineffectual and stupid. Threats to Canada and Mexico over trade practices and “reopening” of NAFTA will be persistent irritants but unlikely to erupt as major crises.

The general rollback of the “pink tide” in Latin America is proceeding along the lines that emerged in the second Obama administration, which (let’s not forget) facilitated the coup in Honduras that returned that country to the rule of death squads and drug cartels. Trump’s presidency and Republican ascendancy in the U.S. Congress surely emboldens the right wing in Venezuela, but the tragic implosion of the “Bolivarian revolution” and devastating social crisis there was underway well before. The parliamentary coup in Brazil, and the incorporation of the post-revolutionary Sandinista Front into the corporate corruption of Nicaraguan politics, also preceded Trump’s rise to office. If anything, the proposed cuts to the State Department budget and its vacant staffing may weaken the capacity of the United States to intervene in situations that are generally already “going Washington’s way.”

Overall, U.S. imperialism in a stage of inevitably declining *absolute* power, accelerated by the longtime arrogant abuse of that power and by the antics of the present administration. In *relative* terms, however, U.S. power remains by far superior to others in view of the weaknesses of Europe and the profound crisis and potential social disintegration of Russia (itself a threat to so-called global “stability”). Only China stands as an emerging rival – more in the political and military than economic sense – and that primarily in the Asia-Pacific region rather than globally.

The absence of a global hegemon is not something that we on the revolutionary left regret – unlike the babblers of “the indispensable nation” on the pro-imperialist political spectrum. We recognize, at the same time, that this situation in the absence of powerful progressive counter-forces exacerbate the tendencies toward chaos. Over it all, of course, hangs the threat to the survival of civilization posed by climate change and environmental collapse – a crisis that the capitalist ruling classes can’t solve, whether (like most) they recognize or (like Trump and the Crack Brothers) willfully deny it.