

# US Global Power: The Trump Period: An Assessment

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## Introduction

US global power in the Trump period reflects the continuities and changes which are unfolding rapidly and deeply throughout the world and which are affecting the position of Washington.

Assessing the dynamics of US global power is a complex problem which requires examining multiple dimensions.

We will proceed by:

- (1) Conceptualizing the principles which dictate empire building, specifically the power bases and the dynamic changes in relations and structures which shape the present and future position of the US.
- (2) Identifying the spheres of influence and power and their growth and decline.
- (3) Examining the regions of conflict and contestation.
- (4) The major and secondary rivalries.
- (5) The stable and shifting relations between existing and rising power centers.
- (6) The internal dynamics shaping the relative strength of competing centers of global power.
- (7) The instability of the regimes and states seeking to retain and expand global power.

## **Conceptualization of Global Power**

US global power is built on several significant facts. These include: the US victory in World War II, its subsequent advanced economy and dominant military position throughout five continents.

The US advanced its dominance through a series of alliances in Europe via NATO; Asia via its hegemonic relationship with Japan, South Korea, Philippines and Taiwan as well as Australia and New Zealand in Oceania; Latin America via traditional client regimes; Africa via neo-colonial rulers imposed following independence.

US global power was built around encircling the USSR and China, undermining their economies and defeating their allies militarily via regional wars.

Post WWII global economic and military superiority created subordinated allies and established US global power, but it created the bases for gradual shifts in relations of dominance.

US global power was formidable but subject to economic and military changes over time and in space.

## **US Spheres of Power: Then and Now**

US global power exploited opportunities but also suffered military setbacks early on, particularly in Korea, Indo-China and Cuba. The US spheres of power were clearly in place in Western Europe and Latin America but was contested in Eastern Europe and Asia.

The most significant advance of US global power took place with the demise and disintegration of the USSR, the client states in Eastern Europe, as well as the transformation of China and Indo-China to capitalism during the 1980's.

US ideologues declared the coming of a unipolar empire free of restraints and challenges to its global and regional power. The US turned to conquering peripheral adversaries. Washington destroyed Yugoslavia and then Iraq – fragmenting them into mini-states. Wall Street promoted a multitude of multi-national corporations to invade China and Indo-China who reaped billions of profits exploiting cheap labor.

The believers of the enduring rule of US global power envisioned a century of US imperial rule.

In reality this was a short-sighted vision of a brief interlude.

## **The End of Unipolarity: New Rivalries and Global and Regional Centers of Power :**

### **An Overview**

US global power led Washington into 'overreach', in several crucial areas: it launched a series of costly prolonged wars, specifically in Iraq and Afghanistan, which had three negative consequences: the destruction of the Iraq armed forces and economy led to the rise of the Islamic State which overtook most of the country; the occupation in Afghanistan which led to the emergence of the Taliban and an ongoing twenty year war which cost hundreds of billions of dollars and several thousand wounded and dead US

soldiers; as a result the majority of the US public turned negative toward wars and empire building

The US pillage and dominance of Russia ended, when President Putin replaced Yeltsin's vassal state. Russia rebuilt its industry, science, technology and military power. Russia's population recovered its living standards.

With Russian independence and advanced military weaponry, the US lost its unipolar military power. Nevertheless, Washington financed a coup which virtually annexed two thirds of the Ukraine. The US incorporated the fragmented Yugoslavian 'statelets' into NATO. Russia countered by annexing the Crimea and secured a mini-state adjacent Georgia.

China converted the economic invasion of US multi-national corporations into learning experiences for building its national economy and export platforms which contributed which led to its becoming an economic competitor and rival to the US.

US global empire building suffered important setbacks in Latin America resulting from the the so-called Washington Consensus. The imposition of neo-liberal policies privatized and plundered their economies, impoverished the working and middle class, and provoked a series of popular uprising and the rise of radical social movements and center-left governments.

The US empire lost spheres of influence in some regions (China, Russia, Latin America, Middle East) though it retained influence among elites in contested regions and

even launched new imperial wars in contested terrain. Most notably the US attacked independent regimes in Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Somalia and Sudan via armed proxies.

The change from a unipolar to a multi polar world and the gradual emergence of regional rivals led US global strategists to rethink their strategy. The Trump regime's aggressive policies set the stage for political division within the regime and among allies.

### **The Obama – Trump Convergence and Differences on Empire Building**

By the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century several new global power alignments emerged: China had become the main economic competitor for world power and Russia was the major military challenger to US military supremacy at the regional level. The US replaced the former European colonial empire in Africa. Washington's sphere of influence extended especially in North and Sub Sahara Africa: Kenya, Libya, Somalia and Ethiopia. Trump gained leverage in the Middle East namely in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Jordan.

Israel retained its peculiar role, converting the US as its sphere of influence.

But the US faced regional rivals for sphere of influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Algeria.

In South Asia US faced competition for spheres of influence from China, India, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Latin America sharp and abrupt shifts in spheres of influence were the norm. US influence declined between 2000 – 2015 and recovered from 2015 to the present.

## **Imperial Power Alignments Under President Trump**

President Trump faced complex global, regional and local political and economic challenges.

Trump followed and deepened many of the policies launched by the Obama-Hillary Clinton policies with regard to other countries and regions . However Trump also radicalized and/or reversed policies of his predecessors. He combined flattery and aggression at the same time.

At no time did Trump recognize the limits of US global power. Like the previous three presidents he persisted in the belief that the transitory period of a unipolar global empire could be re-imposed.

Toward Russia, a global competitor, Trump adopted a policy of ‘rollback’. Trump imposed economic sanctions, with the strategic ‘hope’ that by impoverishing Russia, degrading its financial and industrial sectors that he could force a regime change which would convert Moscow into a vassal state.

At the beginning of his Presidential campaign Trump flirted with the notion of a business accommodation with Putin. However, Trump’s ultra-belligerent appointments and domestic opposition soon turned him toward a highly militarized strategy, rejecting military – including nuclear – agreements, in favor of military escalation.

Toward China, Trump faced a dynamic and advancing technological competitor. Trump resorted to a ‘trade war’ that went far beyond ‘trade’ to encompass a war against

Beijing's economic structure and social relations. The Trump regime-imposed sanctions and threatened a total boycott of Chinese exports.

Trump and his economic team demanded China privatize and denationalize its entire state backed industry. They demanded the power to unilaterally decide when violations of US rules occurred and to be able to re-introduce sanctions without consultations. Trump demanded all Chinese technological agreements, economic sectors and innovations were subject and open to US business interests. In other words, Trump demanded the end of Chinese sovereignty and the reversal of the structural base for its global power. The US was not interested in mere 'trade' – it wanted a return to imperial rule over a colonized China.

The Trump regime rejected negotiations and recognition of a shared power relation: it viewed its global rivals as potential clients.

Inevitably the Trump regime's strategy would never reach any enduring agreements on any substantial issues under negotiations. China has a successful strategy for global power built on a 6 trillion-dollar world-wide Road and Belt (R and B) development policy, which links 60 countries and several regions. R and B is building seaports, rail and air systems linking industries financed by development banks.

In contrast, the US banks exploits industry, speculates and operates within closed financial circuits. The US spends trillions on wars, coups, sanctions and other parasitical activities which have nothing to do with economic competitiveness.

The Trump regime's 'allies' in the Middle East namely Saudi Arabia and Israel, are parasitic allies who buy protection and provoke costly wars.

Europe complains about China's increase in industrial exports and overlook imports of consumer goods. Yet the EU plans to resist Trump's sanctions which lead to a blind alley of stagnation!

### **Conclusion**

The most recent period of the peak of US global power, the decade between 1989-99 contained the seeds of its decline and the current resort to trade wars, sanctions and nuclear threats.

The structure of US global power changed over the past seven decades. The US global empire building began with the US command over the rebuilding of Western European economies and the displacement of England, France, Portugal and Belgium from Asia and Africa.

The Empire spread and penetrated South America via US multi-national corporations. However, US empire building was not a linear process as witness its unsuccessful confrontation with national liberation movements in Korea, Indo China, Southern Africa (Angola, Congo, etc.) and the Caribbean (Cuba). By the early 1960's the US had displaced its European rivals and successfully incorporated them as subordinate allies.



Washington's main rivals for spheres of influence was Communist China and the USSR with their allies among client state and overseas revolutionaries.

The US empire builders' successes led to the transformation of their Communist and nationalist rivals into emergent capitalist competitors.

In a word US dominance led to the construction of capitalist rivals, especially China and Russia.

Subsequently, following US military defeats and prolonged wars, regional powers proliferated in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and Latin America. Regional blocs competed with US clients for power.

The diversification of power centers led to new and costly wars. Washington lost exclusive control of markets, resources and alliances. Competition reduced the spheres of US power.

In the face of these constraints on US global power the Trump regime envisioned a strategy to recover US dominance – ignoring the limited capacity and structure of US political , economic and class relations.

China absorbed US technology and went on to create new advances without following each previous stage.

Russia's recovered from its losses and sanctions and secured alternative trade relations to counter the new challenges to the US global empire. Trump's regime launched a 'permanent trade war' without stable allies. Moreover, he failed to

undermine China's global infrastructure network; Europe demanded and secured autonomy to enter into trade deals with China, Iran and Russia.

Trump has pressured many regional powers who have ignored his threats.

The US still remains a global power. But unlike the past, the US lacks the industrial base to 'make America strong'. Industry is subordinated to finance; technological innovations are not linked to skilled labor to increase productivity.

Trump relies on sanctions and they have failed to undermine regional influentials. Sanctions may temporarily reduce access to US markets' but we have observed that new trade partners take their place.

Trump has gained client regimes in Latin America, but the gains are precarious and subject to reversal.

Under the Trump regime, big business and bankers have increased prices in the stock market and even the rate of growth of the GDP, but he confronts severe domestic political instability, and high levels of turmoil among the branches of government. In pursuit of loyalty over competence, Trump's appointments have led to the ascendancy of cabinet officials who seek to wield unilateral power which the US no longer possesses.

Elliot Abrams can massacre a quarter-million Central Americans with impunity, but he has failed to impose US power over Venezuela and Cuba. Pompeo can threaten North Korea, Iran and China but these countries fortify alliances with US rivals and

competitors. Bolton can advance the interests of Israel but their conversations take place in a telephone booth – it lacks resonance with any major powers.

Trump has won a presidential election, he has secured concessions from some countries but he has alienated regional and diplomatic allies. Trump claims he is making America strong, but he has undermined lucrative strategic multi-lateral trade agreements.

US 'Global Power' does not prosper with bully-tactics. Projections of power alone, have failed – they require recognition of realistic economic limitations and the losses from regional wars.

