

State of Empire:

How failed foreign policy, new emerging economies, and peoples' movements are undermining US power

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When the *New York Times* dubbed the global anti-war protesters of February 15, 2003, “the second super-power,” it challenged the decade-plus view of undisputed U.S. global reach that followed the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The surging protests that brought 12 – 14 million people in 665 cities around the world were not enough to stop the U.S.-British wars against Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond. But in the decade since that extraordinary mobilisation, the U.S. empire’s reach is showing the effects of rising people’s movements, increasing multi-polarity in the world of nations and governments, declining influence in all international spheres other than military, stubbornly lasting economic crisis, and an extraordinary loss of legitimacy both at home and abroad.

Shaking the pillars of empire

US empire, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has rested on several pillars: Military strength, economic influence, political diplomacy and cultural influence.

But the primacy of military power has been at the core of U.S. foreign policy. From the end of the Cold War in 1991 until now, U.S. military spending continued to rise at levels unthinkable in any other country or group of countries. By 2013, with U.S. military spending at \$682 billion, it would take the next nine largest spenders around the world collectively to even begin to catch up – and that bunch (China, Russia, Great Britain, Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, India, Germany and Italy in descending order) would still have \$61 billion left to go.

This has been backed up with an infrastructure of around 700 military bases in 130 countries, that have enabled the US to intervene and advance what consecutive US leaders have described as “US national interests” in every part of the globe.¹

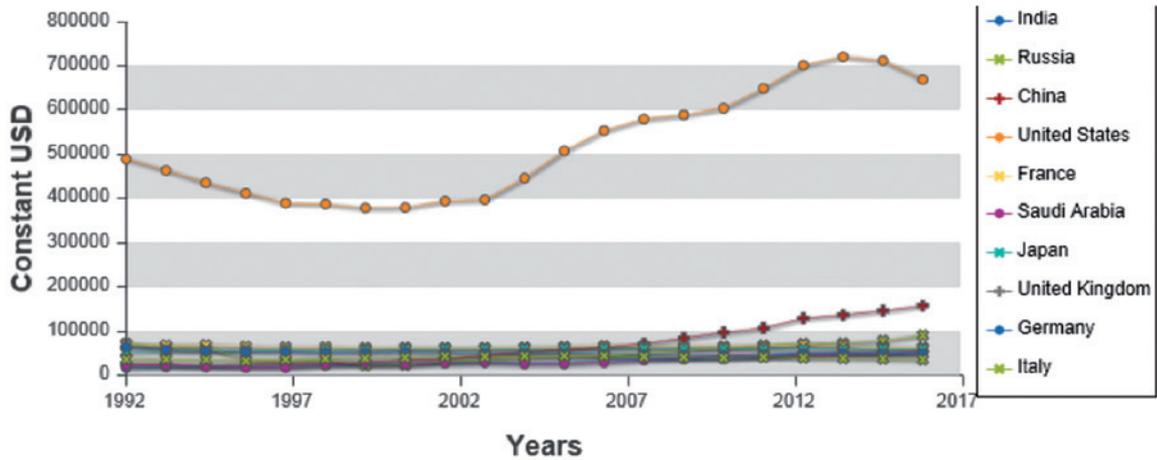
The types of US military intervention have varied but there has not been a year since at least the Second World War that the US has not been involved militarily, directly or by proxy, somewhere in the world. In the aftermath of U.S. defeat in Vietnam in 1975, exhaustion with the U.S. casualties and years of anti-war organizing led to widespread public and military rejection of large-scale troop deployments. The Pentagon, however, continued its Cold War through proxy wars across the Global South – from Central America to Central Asia, from the southern cone of Latin America to southern Africa.

Only in 1990-91, with the Soviet Union’s collapse imminent, did reconsideration of a major ground war with significant deployment of ground and air forces take hold in the United States. Launched against Iraq ostensibly to reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Operation Desert Storm became, for almost a decade in the U.S., the model of what a “good” war should look like. It resulted in a clear victory, expelling Iraqi troops from Kuwait, and there were hardly any U.S. casualties. In mainstream discourse and planning, Iraqi casualties, whether military or civilian, remained uncouncted, unknown, and of no concern – a pattern that would continue more than a decade into the future.

With the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the last of U.S. war queasiness collapsed. Suddenly the massive deployment of U.S. troops in an old-fashioned though updated air- and ground assault and occupation,

Military expenditure data by country, 1992 – 2013

Figures in *constant US dollars* are in millions of US\$ at constant (2011) prices and exchange rates. Years are calendar years except for the USA, where the figures are for financial years.



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seemed perfectly acceptable by mainstream media and institutions and indeed by a significant majority of people across the United States. Afghanistan was immediately dubbed the “good war,” its vengeance-based rationale anointed with red-white-and-blue patriotic legitimacy.

Of course it was the Iraq war of regime change and U.S. occupation, not the earlier war in Afghanistan, which was the main strategic goal of the George W. Bush administration and its neo-conservative supporters. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld all were confident the war would be a cakewalk. The reality of course was completely different as resistance to US occupation mounted, and then later morphed into a full-blown sectarian conflict (even as the anti-occupation battles continued). The US tactics of “shock and awe” were superseded by counter-terrorism: night raids, assassinations, and drone attacks became the new normal. The horrific violence that played out in the media tore the legitimacy of US military intervention to shreds in the court of both US and global public opinion – a delegitimation process that extended far beyond Iraq alone.

One of the results was that Barack Obama won the presidency largely on the strength of his commitment to end the Iraq war, what he dubbed the “dumb war”. Nevertheless, his presidency has remained committed to maintaining US military dominance. Afghanistan became the “good war” with Obama approving a major troop escalation of up to 100,000 U.S. and about 40,000 more NATO troops while also expanding counter-terrorism attacks.

Beyond direct military involvement, Obama has

continued the military trend set by Bush’s “global war on terror,” in his reliance on special operations, assassinations, missile and drone attacks instead of major ground or even large-scale air or naval deployments. This kind of warfare avoids the problem of U.S. casualties, which sometimes cause collateral damage to the war effort by fueling anti-war sentiment in the United States. It also provides an easy (however illegal under international law) way to sideline the need for United Nations or even “coalition” endorsement.

In 2014, despite the economic crisis and despite the budget cuts imposed in the “cut them all” tax, the Pentagon is still one of the few federal institutions that remains overfunded. Congresspeople know that if they want something done internationally – helping to build a school somewhere in Africa maybe – that there is no use going to the State Department. There is no money. The new Africa Command, or Africom, by contrast has a wide brief that includes everything from supporting girls’ education and HIV-AIDS assistance, to clean water development and infrastructure help across the continent. Oh and yes of course AfriCom can also help train, arm, equip (and perhaps impose a bit of ideological clarity on) nascent national armies across the continent and project military influence at a time that China is expanding its economic presence across the continent and when U.S. oil imports from Africa surpassed those from the Middle East.

The production and sales of arms to the rest of the world – especially to dependent developing countries of the Global South – remains a key component of US power. And the US remains by far the largest seller, giving it a

Arms Sales to Developing Nations

Top Suppliers	Percentage
United States	78.7%
Russia	5.7
France	.8
China	2.9
Italy	1.5
Top Recipients	Value of Agreements in Billions
Saudi Arabia	\$33.7
India	6.9
U.A.E	4.5
Israel	4.1
Indonesia	2.1
China	1.9
Taiwan	1.6

Source: Congressional Research Service, Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2004-2011.

continuing source of pressure over even independence-minded governments. The value of all arms transfer agreements with developing nations more than doubled from \$32.7 billion in 2010 to nearly \$71.5 billion in 2011. The United States significantly increased its dominance of the market of arms sales to developing nations from 2010's market share of 43.6% to 78.7% in 2011.

Declining legitimacy and respect

No empire can rest on guns alone. The United States, like its imperial forebears, also depends on producing at least grudging acceptance and respect for a dominant US role. In the last several years this has been seriously undermined, not only because of the catastrophic Iraq occupation, but also by the war in Afghanistan, Guantanamo, drone attacks and most recently by the Snowden NSA leaks of massive U.S. domestic and global surveillance.

The failed war on terror and the loss of international legitimacy has forced the US to turn increasingly to diplomacy – shown this year in unexpected shifts such as the November nuclear deal with Iran, the October stand-down on the threat of U.S. missiles in Syria, and

the possibility that the on-again/off-again Geneva II peace talks on Syria might actually begin. But the loss of legitimacy has also made this diplomacy much less influential. This was evident in 2013 in Syria, where US 'red lines' that might otherwise have led to a military attack were sidelined by popular opposition and Russian diplomacy, or Israel-Palestine where US massive military aid and diplomatic protection have done little to stop the Netanyahu government frequently flipping a finger at the professed goals of its generous sponsor. In the case of Israel, Washington seems increasingly unwilling to bring its ally to heel. In the case of other junior partners, the U.S. is relying more and more on diplomatic force (vetoing Security Council votes when errant allies reject persuasion).

THE VETO

From 1970 through 2013, fully half of all U.S. vetoes ever cast in the Security Council were used to prevent Council efforts to hold Israel accountable for violations of international law and human rights. Another one-third of U.S. vetoes were cast to block international criticism of apartheid regimes in southern Africa. Therefore, more than 83% of U.S. vetoes were cast to protect perpetrators of military occupation, apartheid and colonial rule.

From David Wildman (2008), "Removing the Log in Our Own Eye: Israel/U.S. Churches Seeking Justice in Palestine."

Cultural influence remains – people around the world still want to visit, go to school, find jobs in the United States, and U.S. music, styles, etc. remain iconic. But even U.S. culture has taken a beating from its unpopular wars of empire of the last decade, its unquestioning support for Israeli occupation and apartheid, its drone wars, its spying.... Against this barrage of bad publicity, Nikes and Lady Gaga have a much harder time keeping up.

Weakening influence

The diminishing clout of U.S. economic and political power, and even its military influence, has been increasingly visible. In Egypt, the massive \$1.3 billion annual military aid from Washington proved insufficient to affect the outcome of either the overthrow of U.S.-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak, or the 2013 military coup that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, the first democratically chosen president in modern Egyptian history, who was elected following Mubarak's ouster.

(Some of that reduction in influence was due to the U.S. aid being overshadowed by the \$12 billion pledged by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf states, but partly it reflected declining U.S. power overall.)

The past decade of U.S. wars, occupations, and crises in the Middle East and Central Asia led to one unusual consequence: we saw a relative drop in the kind of direct intervention in Latin America that once typified U.S. domination of the hemisphere. Most recently the limits of U.S. influence were immediately visible in the U.S. silence regarding the 2013 Brazilian protests. More broadly those limits were evident as U.S. officials watched and fumed but were unable to do anything to prevent NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden from seeking asylum, and finding sympathetic ears, from Ecuador and Venezuela and beyond. (It took U.S. pressure on its European allies to close their airspace to ensure that Snowden has not yet been able to travel to Latin America to take advantage of any of the offers.) And the breathtaking array of U.S. spying documented in Snowden's trove of leaked records, particularly the habit of listening in on the cell phones of heads of state, has so angered numerous governments that pending trade agreements, long negotiated and long assumed to be a done deal, may actually be at risk.

Washington's strategic reach and drive towards empire also face an ever-growing challenge by the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and other components of what is increasingly looking like a new multi-polarity in world affairs – especially in the economic realm. It's not full multi-polarity – the U.S. remains the world's unchallenged military super-power, and it still holds the world's largest economy, but its unique power is also no longer unquestioned.

Even in Africa, where the balance of power between the United States and the continent's governments is even less equal, the US has faced the humiliating reality that almost none of the African governments have been prepared to invite the headquarters of AfriCom to set up shop in their country. The only outlier was the president of Liberia, who eagerly offered AfriCom a home. But the U.S. commander wasn't prepared to settle for an infrastructure as fragile and uncertain as that of impoverished Liberia; probably only South Africa, perhaps Kenya or Nigeria would have even been considered, and those countries were having none of it. So the headquarters of the U.S. Africa Command today remains where it began – in Stuttgart, Germany, with its commander and troops comfortably nestled among its castles, parks, mineral water springs and Mercedes-Porsche Museum.

Shoring up a fading global dominance

Some of the strongest aspects of current U.S. power, particularly the use of military force, are most evident, ironically, within what is emerging as a kind of desperation, the struggle to shore up a fading global dominance when only military power remains strategically uncontested. That includes creating a broad redefinition of war to shape a continuing war economy and war society in the U.S., while simultaneously taking into account the diminishing levels of domestic as well as international support for those U.S. wars.

Arms manufacturers and military contractors remain a powerful component of the U.S. economy. These war industries are also among the most profitable. Between 2001 and 2004, during the early years of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, CEOs of defense industries received an average of 200% pay raises, compared to 7% for average large company CEOs. In one instance in 2005, David Brooks, the CEO of DHB Industries that manufactures bulletproof vests, earned \$70 million in compensation, a 13,349% increase over his pre-9/11 compensation. (We should perhaps also note that the same year, the Marines recalled more than 5,000 of the DHB armored vests because of questionable effectiveness. In 2006 another 18,000 vests were recalled. And Brooks was also under investigation for fraud, insider trading and other financial wrongdoing.)²

The military industry remains politically influential due to both their direct links with the Pentagon and their strategic manipulation of jobs. Military producers since World War II have crafted a brilliant strategy of dividing production of weapons systems so that virtually every Congressional district hosts some component of the manufacturing or other work. Despite the inefficiency of such scattered production, the crucial result is that no member of Congress, even the most ardent anti-war voices, are prepared to vote against a new bomber, new drones, new missile systems – since it could mean the loss of even a few dozen desperately needed jobs for their constituents. "Military-industrial complex" indeed!

So the industry is not prepared to accept an overall reduction in U.S. military action or constant preparation for action, regardless of the withdrawal from Iraq or the coming "draw-down" from Afghanistan. Diminishing public support for large-scale troop deployments in most recently, the Middle East and Central Asian wars does not translate into reducing military spending, closing military bases and cutting troop levels – it translates into reshaping what wars look like and what needs to be produced to fight them. So drone production escalates massively, Special Forces become a much more central

component of U.S. interventions, and military bases expand to run drone wars and training exercises.

The changing definitions of military power can also be seen in Obama's announced "pivot" from a Middle East to an Asian (read: China) focus, which means that the U.S. empire is staking out new strategic ground. His policies in the Middle East remain grounded in the triad that has shaped U.S. policy there since the end of WWII – oil, Israel, and stability for the expansion of power, but the Middle East's centrality in U.S. global strategy is certainly being reassessed. The combination of military failures in the area (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya), diminishing dependence on Middle Eastern oil (and oil in general), and massive political upheaval in the region (the Arab Spring's challenge to U.S.-backed dictators, potential rapprochement with Iran, the war in Syria) are all helping set the stage for this US strategic reassessment.

The Asian pivot – meaning primarily a shift in military resources from the Middle East towards China – has yet to fully emerge. However some aspects have begun to take shape, including plans for the build-up of military bases surrounding China. In one proposal for a new airfield in the Northern Marianas Islands, the U.S. Air Force says the rationale is to "support the PACAF [Pacific Air Forces] mission to provide ready air and space power to promote U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region during peacetime, through crisis, and in war."³

In the Middle East, Obama's administration's has moved away from a sole reliance on absolute monarchies and military dictatorships, to tentative new alliances with a set of Islamist-flavored governments and movements. That effort, already underway from talks and new ties with the popular democratic Islamic-oriented government in Turkey and other similar forces, became more visible with the Obama administration's late-in-the-game acceptance of the overthrow of Washington's longtime ally in Egypt, the military dictator General Hosni Mubarak. This shift remains contradictory and challenged by events including the July 2013 military coup in Egypt against the elected Muslim Brotherhood-led government, the descent into chaos of post-Qaddafi Libya, new political challenges to the AKP government in Turkey, and of course the regionally expanding civil war in Syria.

The November 2013 deal between Iran and the U.S.-led "Perm 5 + 1" (the five permanent members of the Security Council – Britain, China, France, Russia and the U.S. – plus Germany) is further evidence of a US desire to shift its focus and end its potentially disastrous efforts for regime change in Iran. That shift is hotly contested by powerful sectors of U.S. elites outside of the White House, and it remains uncertain whether the Obama administration can (or will) resist the fierce pressure from

Israel, Congress, Saudi Arabia, U.S. neo-cons and other supporters of war with Iran, all of whom are trying to undermine the deal. (The White House itself continues to undermine the potential for longer-term negotiations with Iran, by trying to exclude Tehran from participation in the "Geneva II" Syria talks scheduled for the same time as the U.S.-Iran negotiations.)

U.S. support for Israel – including \$3 + billion per year in military aid, diplomatic protection at the United Nations, and use of the veto to ensure immunity from accountability for war crimes – however remains unchanged, and "managing" the conflict rather than ending the occupation remains Washington's strategic goal. The discourse on Israel and Palestine – in the media, popular culture, academia, in intelligence and military circles, even [rarely] in Congress – has though changed massively. And while Congress and the White House continue to root their policy in old assumptions, they will before too long have to confront new realities. That includes the fact that while the powerful pro-Israel lobbies continue to have enough money to threaten members of Congress with unexpected challengers, they can no longer control the views of Jewish voters. Change in the Jewish community and beyond means that pro-Israel views can no longer be taken for granted.

Dangers of a fading empire

Beyond Afghanistan, the reality of war continues to shape the fading U.S. empire. It is an old story that a cornered animal, or person, or in this case empire, continues to lash out, and can often become even more dangerous than one in its prime. That the wars of the late U.S. empire remain largely hidden from all but those facing their consequences and those living – or dying – under their bombs and drones, does not change that stark reality.

On May 23, 2013, Obama gave a much-awaited speech on drones, assassination policy, and Guantanamo. It was, in a sense, his claiming of a permanent war on terror as his own – albeit a different version of George W. Bush's "long war," with significantly diminished capacity. President Obama said again he was deeply committed to reforming the GWOT – but so far, he has not committed to actually ending it. He raised some of the critical issues that his administration had previously refused to talk about, and tacitly acknowledged some of the key criticisms. He even recognized that eventually, the endless borderless limitless "global war on terror" would in fact someday have to end. He quoted James Madison's statement, "No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare." And he admitted that U.S.

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counter-terrorism strategy had indeed resulted in civilian casualties, that “any U.S. military action in foreign lands risks creating more enemies” and that “those deaths will haunt us.” He even conceded that the U.S. has to address “the underlying grievances and conflicts that feed extremism – from North Africa to South Asia” because “force alone cannot make us safe.”

So Obama described what he would like to do, and what he would like his legacy to be – closing Guantanamo, choosing capture over killing of suspected insurgents, killing fewer civilians, limiting excessive executive power – but he never actually committed himself to specific actions to accomplish any of those goals. Participants in the every-Tuesday-morning White House meetings continue to check off names to be added to the “kill or capture” list. Drone attacks continue to kill women, children, other civilians in their “surgical precision.” Empire is not over. There is not yet a new foreign policy. So far, it is the 162 prisoners left in Guantanamo – still facing years of imprisonment and isolation without hope of trial, embodying a legacy of torture – who remain the symbolic core of Obama’s legacy, for his years as steward of the U.S. empire.

- 1 The total number of foreign US bases dropped by more than 300 with the 2011 withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Over the last decade local protests against foreign bases - almost all of them from the US - have posed challenges to many more because of public anger at the social and environmental problems the bases created. TNI in the first decade of this century coordinated the International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases, which linked these different groups.
- 2 “Defense and oil executives cash in on conflict: Executive Excess 2006,” Sarah Anderson et al, Institute for Policy Studies, http://www.ips-dc.org/reports/executive_excess_2006.
- 3 Executive Summary, U.S. Air Force, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands Divert Activities Environmental Impact Statement, September 2012, http://tinianchamber.com/resources/milconfor2012/presentations/CNMI_Divert_EIS_Exec_Sum_2012_09_10_CML.pdf