


After Trump, What Prospects for Biden in the Global Imperial Disorder?

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Claudio Katz presciently analyzes shifts in the imperialist order, the mainstay of global capitalism, and weighs what the increasing social and political polarization within the United States portends for the Joe Biden administration in the effort to restore its sagging world dominance.

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— Richard Fidler

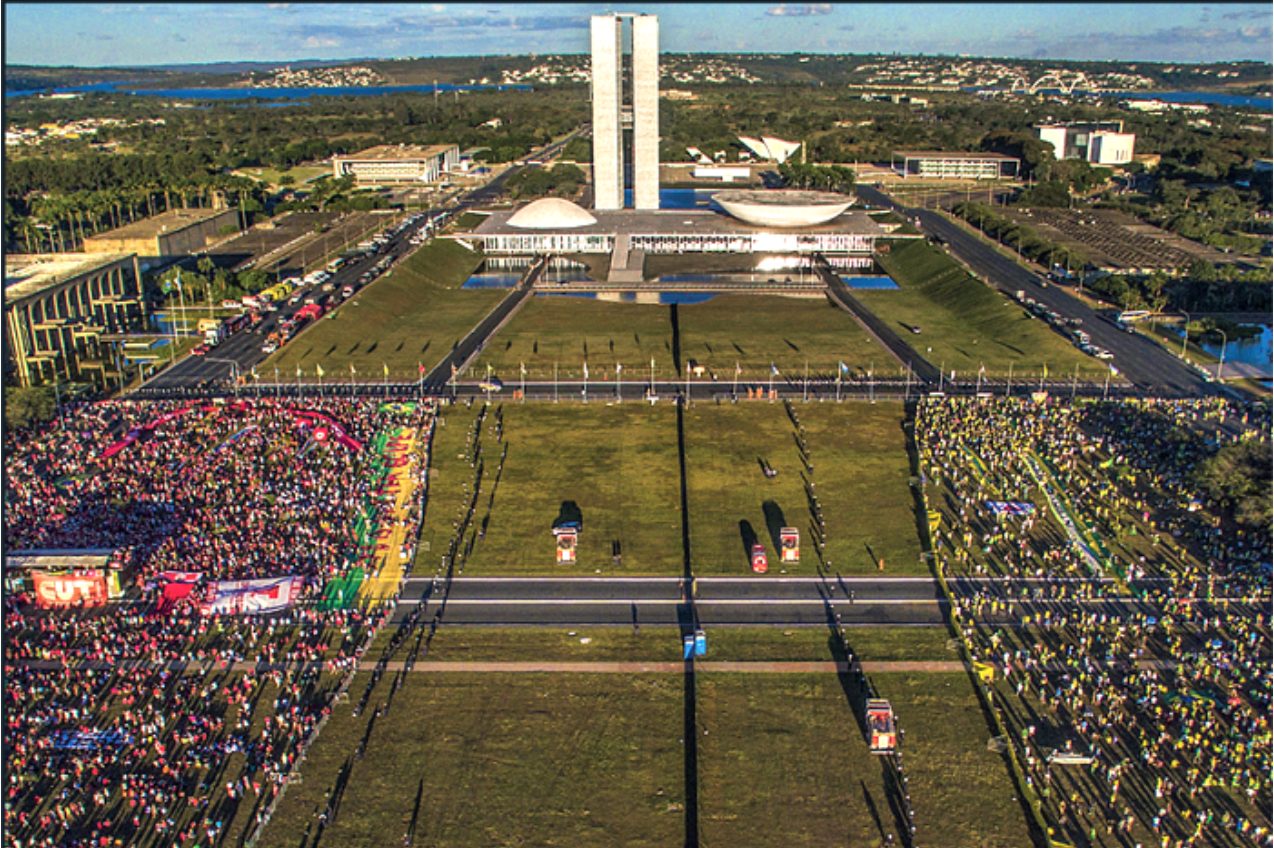
The United States' Failed Imperial Recovery

The United States seeks to regain its sagging world dominance by capturing wealth, quelling rebellions, and deterring competitors. It supports this operation with gigantic military power and a burdensome arms economy.

Hybrid wars have radically transformed imperial interventionism. They have added the chaotic scene of refugees and civilian victims generated by the demolition of several states.

The breakdown of internal cohesion is the main obstacle to the US imperial revival. Trump's economic and geopolitical failures confirmed those limitations. This impotence did not reverse rearmament with new atomic devices. With greater diplomacy Biden will pursue aggressive policies while using worn out ideological covers.

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Seeking Supremacy

The American attempt to regain world dominance is the main characteristic of 21st century imperialism. Washington intends to regain that primacy in the face of the adversities generated by globalization and multipolarity. It confronts the emergence of a great rival and the insubordination of its old allies.

The primary power, the United States, has lost authority and capacity for intervention. It seeks to counteract the spread of world power and the systematic erosion of its leadership. In recent decades it has tried several paths to reverse its decline, all of them unsuccessful, and it continues to probe for a course toward recovery.

All of its actions are based on the use of force. The United States has lost the control of international politics it exhibited in the past, but it maintains great firepower. To force its own recomposition it is expanding its destructive arsenal. This behavior confirms the terrifying dynamics of imperialism as a mechanism of domination.

In the first half of the 20th century, the great powers disputed world leadership through war. In the subsequent period, the United States exercised that leadership with armed interventions in the periphery to confront the socialist threat. Most recently, Western capitalism has faced a very severe crisis with its damaged helmsman.

Washington seeks to regain supremacy in three areas that define imperial rule: the management of natural resources, the subjugation of peoples, and the neutralization of rivals. All of its operations are aimed at capturing wealth, quelling rebellions, and deterring competitors.

The control of raw materials is essential to maintain military primacy and guarantee the provision of supplies that affect the course of the economy. Containing popular uprisings is essential to stabilize the capitalist order that the Pentagon has ensured for decades. The United States wants to maintain the force it traditionally used to intervene in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. It also needs to deal with the defiant Chinese to subdue other rivals. In those battles, the success or failure of the US imperial resurrection will be resolved.

The Centrality of War

Imperialism is synonymous with military power. All powers have used this to dominate, knowing that capitalism could not survive without armies. It is true that the system also resorts to manipulation, deception, and misinformation, but it does not replace the coercive threat with simple ideological pre-eminence. It combines violence with consent and asserts an implicit power (*soft power*) that is based on explicit power (*hard power*).

These fundamental features should be remembered in the face of theories that replace imperialism with hegemony as the organizing concept of contemporary geopolitics. Certainly, the powerful have reinforced their preaching through the media. They have developed a systematic spread of disinformation and concealment of reality. They have also perfected the use of the political and judicial institutions of the state to secure their privileges. But in the international sphere, the supremacy of the great powers is resolved through military threats.

The global system operates with a military guard under United States command. Since 1945 the United States has engaged in 211 interventions in 67 countries. It currently maintains 250,000 soldiers stationed in 700 bases distributed in 150 nations (Chacón, 2019). This mega-structure has guided US policy since the dropping of the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the formation of NATO as an auxiliary arm of the Pentagon.

The three major incursions of the Cold War (Korea in 1950-1953, Vietnam in 1955-1975, and Afghanistan in 1978-1989) demonstrated the deadly scope of that power. Washington has built an international framework of military installations unprecedented in history (Mancillas, 2018).

Control of raw materials has been a defining goal in many war operations. The massacres that the Middle East undergoes to determine who handles oil illustrate this centrality. That issue detonated the bleeding of Iraq and Libya and influenced the incursions in Afghanistan and Syria. Crude oil reserves are also the loot coveted by the generals who organize the harassment of Iran and the siege of Venezuela.

The Arms Economy

American foreign policy is conditioned by the network of contractors who get rich from war. They profit from the manufacture of explosives that must be tested in some corner of the planet. The military-industrial apparatus needs these confrontations. It thrives on spending that increases not only in periods of intense warfare, but also in phases of détente.

Much of the technological change takes place in the military orbit. Computer science, aeronautics, and space activity are the epicenters of this experimentation. The big suppliers of the Pentagon take advantage of the protection of the state budget to manufacture devices twenty times more expensive than their civilian equivalents. They operate with large sums in a sector autonomous from the competitive restrictions of the market (Katz, 2003).

This weapons model is developing in step with exports. The 48 large firms of the military-industrial complex handle 64% of world armaments manufacturing. Between 2015 and 2019, its sales volume rose 5.5% compared to the previous five-year period and 20% compared to the 2005-2009 period.

Global military spending reached its highest level since the end of the Cold War (\$1.74-trillion) in 2017, with the United States leading all transactions (Ferrari, 2020). It accounts for one half of the expenditures and hosts the first five companies in this activity.

North American technological leadership depends on that international primacy in the war sector. The development of digital capitalism in the last decade is a continuation of previous military manufacturing and is congruent with the use of weapons within the country. The United States is the main market for the 12 billion bullets that are manufactured annually. The National Rifle Association provides material and cultural support to the continued centrality of the Pentagon.

But this gravitation of the arms economy also generates many adversities for the productive system. It requires a volume of financing that the country cannot provide with its own resources. The pothole is covered with a fiscal deficit and external indebtedness that threaten the seigniorage of the dollar.

The United States has sustained its military scaffolding since the postwar period with the great tribute it imposed on its partners. That burden is currently resisted by European allies and has triggered a NATO funding crisis. With the Soviet Union gone, the Old Continent objects to the usefulness of a device that Washington uses for its own interests.

The US military economy is based on a model of high costs and low competitiveness. The gendarme of capitalism was able for a long time to force the subordination of its disarmed rivals. However, it no longer has the same margin to manage its burdensome innovations in the military area. Other countries develop the same technological changes with cheaper and more efficient operations in the civil sphere.

War spending has a very contradictory influence on the economic cycle of North America. It underpins the level of activity when the state channels taxes into captive demand. It also absorbs excess capital that does not find profitable investments in other branches. But in adverse times, it increases the fiscal deficit and captures portions of public spending that could be used for numerous productive allocations. At those times, the revenues generated by military expenditures for technology and exports do not compensate for the deterioration (and disastrous allocation) of public resources.

Wars of a New Kind

The current external intervention of the United States recreates the old patterns of imperial action. Conspiracy persists as the central component of these modalities. The old CIA tradition of coups against progressive governments has reappeared in many countries.

Washington also adopts “proxy war” in priority areas to harass nations crucified by the State Department (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela) (Petras, 2018).

But the failure in Iraq marked a shift in the modalities of intervention. That occupation became a great failure due to the resistance faced in the country and the inconsistency of the operation itself. That fiasco led to the replacement of traditional invasions by a new variety of hybrid wars (VVAA, 2019).

In these incursions, current military actions are replaced by an amalgam of unconventional actions, with a greater weight of parastate forces and increasing use of terror. This type of operation has prevailed in the Balkans, Syria, Yemen, and Libya (Korybko, 2020).

In these cases, the imperial action assumes a police connotation of harassment, which privileges the submission of adversaries over outright victory. These interventions expand the operations that the DEA perfected in its struggle with drug trafficking. Control of the harassed country becomes more relevant (or feasible) than its defeat, and high-tech aggression occupies a pre-eminent place (“fifth generation wars”).

In countless cases, the terrorist component of these actions has exceeded the course designed by the White House, generating an autonomous sequence of destructive actions. That lack of control was verified with the Taliban, initially trained in Afghanistan to harass a pro-Soviet government. So also, with the jihadists, trained in Saudi Arabia to erode secular governments in the Arab world.

Through hybrid wars, the United States tries to control its rivals, without engaging in regular warlike interventions. It combines economic siege and terrorist provocation with the promotion of ethnic, religious, or national conflicts in the target countries. It also encourages the right-wing channeling of discontent through authoritarian leaders who have profited from the “colour revolutions.” These operations have allowed several East European countries to be incorporated into the NATO siege against Russia.

Hybrid wars include more pervasive media campaigns than the old postwar barrage against communism. With new enemies (terrorism, Islamists, drug trafficking), threats (failed states) and dangers (Chinese expansionism), Washington deploys its campaigns through an extended network of foundations and NGOs. It also uses information warfare on social media.

Imperial assaults include a novel variety of resources. To grasp the scope of these conspiracies, it is enough to observe what happened in South America with the operation implemented by various judges and the media against progressive leaders (lawfare). But these outrages cause unprecedented disruptions on countless levels.

Chaotic Scenarios

During the first half of the 20th century, wars took on an industrial scale, with masses of soldiers exterminated by the war machine – and so many burials of anonymous dead that these total wars are memorialized in tombs of the “unknown soldiers” (Traverso, 2019).

In recent decades, another modality of actions has prevailed with decreasing commitment of troops on the battlefields. The United States has perfected that approach, using aerial bombardments that destroy villages without the direct presence of the Marines. This type of intervention was consolidated with the generalized use of drones and satellites.

With these modalities, the imperialism of the 21st century destroys or balkanizes the countries that hinder the resurgence of North American domination. The increase in membership in the United Nations is an indicator of that reshuffle.

The unarmed population has been the main one affected by incursions that dissolved the old distinction between combatants and civilians. Only 5% of the victims of World War I were civilians. This figure rose to 66% in WWII and averages 80-90% in current conflicts (Hobsbawm, 2007: Ch. 1).

The operations that the Pentagon supports have definitively swept away all the norms of the Hague Conventions (1899 and 1907), which distinguished uniformed men from civilians. The same dissolution takes place in the external and internal conflicts of numerous states. The border between peace and war has blurred, increasing the indescribable suffering of the refugees. The agency that calculates the number of those without shelter registered in 2019 a total of 79.5 million people displaced from their homes.

This monumental number of forced transfers illustrates the degree of prevailing violence. Although conflicts do not reach the widespread scale of the past, their consequences on civilians are proportionately greater.

Imperial aggression systematically breaches the borders between countries. It imposes a geographical reshaping that contrasts with the rigid boundary barriers of the Cold War. Those lines defined strict fields of confrontation and contained populations in their localities of origin.

The current outbreaks of war heighten the effects of the growing emigration pressure toward the centers of the northern hemisphere. Flight from war converges with the massive escape from the economic devastation suffered by several countries on the periphery.

US imperialism is the main cause of contemporary war tragedies. It provides weapons; fosters racial, religious or ethnic tensions; and promotes terrorist practices that destroy the affected countries (Armanian, 2017).

What happened in the Arab world illustrates this sequence. Under the orders of successive presidents, the United States implemented the demolition of Afghanistan (Reagan-Carter), Iraq (Bush), and Syria (Obama). Those massacres involved 220,000 deaths in the first country, 650,000 in the second, and 250,000 in the third. The social disintegration and the political resentment generated by these massacres, in turn, unleashed suicide attacks in the central countries. Terror led to blinded responses of more terror.

Imperial atrocities have undermined the very objectives of those incursions. To displace Gaddafi, imperialism pulverized the territorial integrity of Libya and undid the system of plugs built in North Africa to contain the emigration toward Europe. The country became a center for the exploitation of migrants, run by the mafias that the West financed to take over Libya. Faced with such chaos, the old colonialists no longer design new formal borders. They only improvise refugee containment mechanisms (Buxton; Akkerman, 2018).

The Pentagon has also deployed some 50 hidden bases in Africa, while Western oil companies control with armed action their fields in Nigeria, Sudan, and Niger (Armanian, 2018). That appetite for natural resources is the background to the tragedies on the black continent. Imperial action has encouraged ancestral ethnic confrontations to increase its management of these resources.

The Internal Fracture

The main obstacle facing US imperial recomposition is the breakdown of the country's internal cohesion. For decades, that was the foundation upholding the intervention of the primary power in the rest of the world. But the giant of the North has undergone a radical change as a consequence of economic setbacks, political polarization, racial tensions and its new ethnic-population composition. The cultural uniformity that nurtured the "American dream" has faded, and the United States faces an unprecedented rift.

The divisions have eroded the sustainability of US interference abroad. Military operations do not have the backing of the past and have been affected by the end of the draft. Washington no longer embarks on its incursions with an army of conscripts, nor does it justify its actions with messages of blind fidelity to the flag. To carry out surgical operations, it has opted for use of a more limited and more precise weaponry. It prioritizes the media impact and the containment of casualties in its own ranks.

The privatization of war synthesizes these trends. The use of mercenaries and contractors negotiating the price of each massacre has become generalized. This form of warmongering without the population's commitment explains the loss of general interest in imperial actions. Wars without recruits require higher expenditures but attenuate internal resistance. They prevent even perceiving the failures in distant territories (Iraq, Afghanistan) as their own adversities.

However, the counterpart to that divorce is the increasing imperial difficulty in venturing into more ambitious projects. It is very difficult to regain global leadership without the adherence of significant segments of the population.

Postwar imperialism was based on an official authority that has dissipated. The end of mass enlistment introduced a new democratic right, which paradoxically impairs the ability of the US state to regain its declining imperial power (Hobsbawm, 2007: Ch. 5).

The privatization of war accentuates, in turn, the traumatic effects of divorce between the gendarmes and the population. The trauma of returnees from Iraq or Afghanistan illustrates that effect. The use of mercenaries also expands internal militarization and the uncontrollable explosion of violence caused by the free carrying of arms.

This sequence of corrosion assumes a greater scope with the right-wing channeling of social discontent. Manifested in the Tea Party, it was consolidated with Trumpism.

Xenophobia, chauvinism, and white supremacy have spread with racist speeches that blame minorities, migrants, and foreigners for America's decline. But that nationalist fury only deepens the internal fracture, without recreating the extended social base that US imperialism used to penetrate abroad.

Trump's Failings

The last four years have provided a stark portrait of the failed US attempt to regain imperial domination. Trump favoured the recomposition of the economy and hoped to use the country's military superiority to prop up the productive relaunch.

Despite this support, he faced very tough external negotiations, in the effort to extend to the commercial plane the monetary advantages that the dollar maintains. He promoted bilateral agreements and questioned free trade in order to take advantage of the financial primacy of Wall Street and the Federal Reserve.

Trump tried to preserve technological supremacy through increasing demands for payment of intellectual property. With this control of financialization and digital capitalism, he hoped to forge a new balance between the globalist and Americanist sectors of the ruling class. He gambled on combining local protection with global business.

The billionaire prioritized the containment of China. He wrestled brutally to reduce the trade deficit, to repeat the submission that Reagan imposed on Japan in the 1980s. He also sought to consolidate the precedence over Europe, taking advantage of the existence of a unified state apparatus in opposition to transatlantic competitors that were unable to extend their monetary unification to the fiscal and banking plane. Under the guise of makeshift disorder, the occupant of the White House conceived an ambitious US recovery plan (Katz, 2020).

But his strategy depended on the endorsement of allies (Australia, Saudi Arabia, Israel), the subordination of partners (Europe, Japan) and the complacency of one adversary (Russia) to force the capitulation of another (China). Trump did not get those alignments, and the North American relaunch failed from the outset.

The confrontation with China was its main failure. Threats did not intimidate the Asian dragon, which accepted greater purchases and fewer exports without validating the financial openness and the brake on technological investments. China did not accommodate its monetary policy to the claims of a debtor that has placed the bulk of its securities in Asian banks.

Nor did the United States partners give up business with the large Asian client. Europe did not join the confrontation with China, and England continued to play its own game in the world. To top it off, China increased its trade with all the countries of the American hemisphere (Merino, 2020).

Trump only managed to induce economic relief, without reversing any significant imbalance in the economy. That lack of results came to the fore in the crisis precipitated by the pandemic and in his own expulsion from the White House.

The same adversities were ascertained in the geopolitical orbit. Trump tried to neutralize the heavy legacy of military failures. He favoured a cautious handling of war adventures in the face of the Iraq fiasco, the Somalia sinkhole, and the debates over Syria.

To reverse the unsuccessful Bush campaigns, he ordered troop withdrawals in the most exposed settings. He transferred operations to his Saudi and Israeli partners and reduced the previous protagonism. He supported the annexation of the West Bank and the massacres of the Yemenis, but did not commit the Pentagon to another intervention. He withdrew the Marines from the Libyan crisis, pulled troops from Syria, and abandoned Kurdish allies. In that region, he endorsed the increasing intervention of Turkey and consented to the pre-eminence of Russia.

Trump again experienced the same powerlessness as his predecessors in controlling nuclear proliferation. This inability to restrict the possession of atomic bombs to a select club of powers illustrates the North American limitations. The United States cannot

dictate the course of the planet, if a small swath of countries shares the power of blackmail granted by nuclear responsibility.

The failed deals with North Korea confirmed those weaknesses of Washington. Kim perfected the missile structure and rejected the disarmament offer in exchange for power supplies or food. He knows that it is only nuclear power that prevents the repetition in his country of what happened in Iraq, Libya, or Yugoslavia.

That atomic shelter is the protection against an empire that imposed the division of the Korean peninsula and rejects any reunification deal. The United States constantly vetoes advances in the Russian-Chinese proposal to stop the militarization of both sides (Gandáségui, 2017). But after several threats, Trump shelved his boastful pose and accepted the simple continuity of the talks.

A very similar barrier was encountered in Iran. There, too, the imperialist priority has been to curb nuclear development in order to guarantee Israel's regional atomic monopoly. Trump broke the disarmament agreement signed by Obama that international verification made viable.

He redoubled the provocations with embargoes and attacks. The assassination of General Soleimani was the climax of that aggression. This was a blatant act of terrorism toward the chief of staff of a country that did not carry out any aggression against the United States. But this type of crime — followed by the elimination of several high-ranking scientists — has failed to stop Iran's gradual incorporation into the club of countries protected with atomic armour.

This very dissemination of nuclear power prevents Washington from imposing its arbitration in other regional conflicts. The tensions between Pakistan and India, for example, occur between two armies with this type of weaponry and a consequent ability to become autonomous from the imperial tutelage.

Trump also failed in his attacks against Venezuela. He promoted every imaginable plot to regain control of the main oil reserve in the hemisphere but was unable to subdue Chavismo. His threats collided with the impossibility of repeating the old military interventions in Latin America.

The New Rearmament Strategy

Trump did not limit himself to holding back the military presence abroad in the hope of relaunching the economy. He drastically increased the military budget to rule out any suggestion of an effective imperial withdrawal. Those expenditures jumped from \$580-billion (2016) to \$713-billion (2020). He guaranteed record profits to missile manufacturers and tested a mega-bomb of unprecedented scope in Afghanistan.

Trump relaunched Star Wars and broke the nuclear disarmament treaties. He also endorsed the shift toward "Great Power Competition" (GPC), replacing the "Global War on Terrorism" (GWOT). That change tends to replace the identification, tracking, and destruction of adverse forces in remote areas of Asia, Africa, or the Middle East with a

preparatory rearmament of more conventional conflicts. This turnaround closed the Bush chapter of incursions into remote areas, to resume the traditional confrontation with the enemies of the Pentagon (Klare, 2020).

With this perspective, Trump complemented the trade pressure on China with a great deployment of the Pacific fleet. He demanded the demilitarization of the South Sea reefs to break the defensive shield of his rival. He drastically reinforced the movement of troops, initiated by Obama, from the Middle East to the Asian continent.

The pressure on China escalated with the expansion of the navy and the acquisition of a staggering number of ships and submarines. The air force was modernized in tune with all the innovations in artificial intelligence and cyberwar training.

To harass China, Trump reinforced the bloc forged with India, Japan, Australia, and South Korea (the Quad). That military alignment presupposes that eventual clashes with Beijing will be fought in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. A well-known State Department adviser locates the outcome of the Sino-American confrontation in that region (Mearsheimer, 2020).

The strategy against Russia was more cautious and molded to the initial attempt to lure Putin into a deal against Xi Jinping. From the failure of that operation emerged the re-equipment initiatives of the land armies on the European continent. The White House continued its work of military co-option of the countries bordering Russia and extended the NATO missile network from the Baltic Republics and Poland to Romania.

With this new strategy, the deployment of nuclear weapons resumed its old centrality. Trump approved the development of atomic munitions based on limited-range warheads and sea-launched ballistic missiles. The first series of these bombs have already been manufactured and delivered to the high command.

To develop these explosive devices, Trump broke the nuclear rationalization treaties concluded in 1987. He put an end to the mechanism of making the destruction of obsolete weapons compatible with Russia. He also sponsored the first test of a medium-range missile since the end of the Cold War.

The new war strategy explains the brutal demand for greater European funding of NATO. The White House bully has reminded the West that it must pay for the aid provided by the United States. This demand has generated the greatest transatlantic tension since the postwar period.

Trump sought to drag his allies into conflicts with China and Russia, which undermine business on the Old Continent. In that region there is serious resistance to the militarization promoted by the United States. But European capitalism has been unable to emancipate itself from North American warmongering, and that is why it accompanied the incursions in Iraq and Ukraine. It rejects the demand for more spending on NATO but without breaking from its subordination to Washington.

European alter-imperialism conceives its own defense system in close connection with the Pentagon, and for that reason, it fails to achieve the unification of its own army. There is a divorce between the military supremacy of France and the economic power of Germany that prevents this initiative from materializing (Serfati, 2018).

Trump was unable to subdue Europe, but his interlocutors in Brussels, Paris, and Berlin continued to lack a compass of their own. This lack of definition increased the capacity exhibited by Russia to contain the US imperial recomposition. Putin reinforced the defensive levee he established with Xi Jinping and got away with the geopolitical arm wrestling in Syria, Crimea, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The ongoing gulf between these results and the disintegration that prevailed in the Yeltsin era is very visible.

As China does not dispute with the same geopolitical frontality, its achievements are less visible, but it exhibits impressive economic results in its competition with the United States. In the end, Trump portrayed the American inability to regain imperial primacy.

The Assault on the Capitol

Trump said goodbye with an adventure that portrays the magnitude of the American political crisis. The invasion of Congress was not an impromptu act. The far-right groups disseminated the plan in advance, financed trips, booked hotels, and transported weapons. Inside the enclosure, they followed the access routes to the indicated offices of the complicit Representatives.

The police created a liberated zone and ensured the presence of the assailants for hours. If a group of African Americans had tried such an action, they would have been instantly gunned down. Peaceful demonstrations in this same place have ended in recent years with hundreds of injuries and detainees.

Trump participated directly in the coup. He instigated the protesters, maintained communications with their leaders and promised to support them. The aim of the action was to pressure Republican congressmen who questioned the challenge of the election result. This included threats to force them to follow the president's instruction. With the provocation on Capitol Hill, Trump tried to support his absurd claim of fraud. He managed to maintain the loyalty of a hundred legislators and delay the eviction, but in the end, he abandoned the game and condemned the occupiers.

The raid was as surreal as the specimens that perpetrated it. The group of hallucinated individuals that was photographed in the armchairs of the Congress seemed extracted from a TV fantasy show. But their bizarre action does not erase the fascist imprint of the operation.

All the cranks who participated in the takeover are part of one or another of the white supremacist militias. They operate in fanatical sects (QAnon Shaman) or refer to the congresswoman who won her mandate with the symbol of the machine gun (Marjorie Taylor Greene). The police who opened the doors of Congress participate in these ultra-rightist formations.

The paramilitary groups have 50,000 well-equipped members. They specialize in attacking youth or democratic demonstrations, and a few months ago they staged a trial of the assault in front of the Michigan legislature. A quarter of these militias are made up of soldiers or police officers, and that affiliation was confirmed in the list of those arrested for the attack on the Capitol.

The high military presence in the fascist platoons forced two pronouncements from the high command, rejecting the involvement of the armed forces in the adventures of Trumpism. Ten former defense secretaries signed that warning, and the FBI organized Biden's inauguration with an unprecedented operation to dismantle possible attacks. After many years of free movement and preaching, fascist groups have become the main terrorist threat. The supremacists (and not the heirs of Bin Laden) are singled out as the great danger in the making. Unlike what happened with the Twin Towers, this time the enemy is internal.

Those groups are sustained by a racist social base that has updated the neo-confederate emblems. They are a resumption of periodic waves of reaction against democratic conquests. In the past, they executed freed slaves or violated civil rights. Now they reject racial integration, multiculturalism, and affirmative action.

African Americans continue to be the main target of a resentment that extends to immigrants. For that reason, the challenge to the anti-Trump election result was so intense in states with black and Latino voters. Evangelical extremists add their crusade against abortion and feminism to the ultra-conservative campaign.

The assault on the Capitol was not the antithesis of US reality that Biden envisioned. It expresses the agonizing state of the political system and complements all the anomalies that surfaced during the elections. The irruption of armed fascists in Congress is not alien to the undemocratic electoral system that the ruling plutocracy has created.

Coup attempts were the only missing ingredient in that infamous scheme. The hordes of Trumpians filled that void, burying all the mockery toward the political regimes of Latin America. This time the typical episode of a Banana Republic took place in Washington. The bandits did not storm the parliaments of Honduras, Bolivia, or El Salvador. The operation that the State Department exports and the Yankee embassy organizes was home-made.

The political consequences of that episode are immeasurable. They directly affect the imperial capacity for intervention. The OAS will have to reinvent its scripts to condemn "violations of democratic institutions" in countries that simply imitate what happened in Washington. It should also explain why the leadership of the Republicans and Democrats tolerated that incursion, without any forceful retaliation against those responsible.

The most enduring effects are still nebulous, but the comparisons made with the capture of Rome by the barbarians or with the marches of Mussolini illustrate the gravity of what happened. Several historians estimate that the country faces the largest internal confrontation since the civil war of the 19th century.

In the immediate future, there are two opposing scenarios of Trump's decline or resurgence. The exponents of the first note, in particular, that the coup adventure accentuated a deterioration already endured by the tycoon, as a consequence of the pandemic and the electoral defeat (PSL, 2021; Naím, 2021). He was released from removal from office (25th Amendment) but not from an impeachment that could disqualify him in the future. He said goodbye amidst the desertion of officials, rejections by Republican congressmen, and a shameful pardon of his accomplices. The militarized inaugural deterred the marches planned to support his administration.

Trump was abandoned by sectors of finance and industry that had supported his campaign, and the technology sector repudiated him by cutting off his Twitter and Facebook accounts. The establishment fears the uncontrollable effects of the former president's moves. If the decline of Trump is confirmed, the assault on the Capitol will be compared to the "Tejerazo" of Spain in 1981 (the final and failed attempt of the Franco regime to retain power).

But an opposing library of analysts estimates that what happened will not modify the solid political insertion of Trumpism (Vandepitte, 2021; Farber, 2021; Post, 2020). The millionaire has a social base that gathered 47% of the voters and subjected the Republican party to his leadership. Many legislators have repeated his fable of electoral fraud, with the crazy addition that it was perpetrated by a ghostly leftist group (*Antifas*).

This vision postulates that Trumpism has been consolidated within the state structure (police, judges, officials) and could build a third formation to challenge bipartisanship, if it fails to tame the Republican cauldron. The disqualification of Trump would be counteracted by the protagonism of his children or some other successor. And the animosity of the financiers would be offset by other taxpayers.

But the two options of fall or persistence of Trumpism do not depend only on the behavior of the elites and the realignments of the Republicans. Still pending at the opposite pole is the reaction of young people, the precarious, Afro-Americans, feminists, and Latinos, who, before the electoral period, occupied the streets with huge demonstrations. If those voices resume their presence — with the demand to democratize the electoral system — the future of the magnate will be settled in another scenario.

Continuities and Questions

Trump's departure will lower the tone of imperial rhetoric but not the intensity of US aggression. With increased use of diplomacy and hypocrisy, Biden shares the state policies of his predecessor.

The two establishment parties have alternated in the management of the structures that sustain the military pre-eminence of the leading power. The evidence of this shared warmongering is beyond counting. The Democrats not only initiated the great wars in Korea and Vietnam, both Clinton and Obama authorized more external incursions than Trump, and Biden himself supported the 2002 invasion of Iraq, supervised the intervention in Libya, and endorsed the coup in Honduras (Luzzani, 2020).

The US imperial system is based on an undemocratic political system that guarantees the regular distribution of public offices between the two traditional formations. In the last election, it was particularly visible how these manipulation mechanisms operate. In the United States, the elementary principle of one person-one vote does not work. There is also no federal election registry or a single electoral authority. You have to register, and the winner from each state gets the Electoral College vote.

The plutocracy that manages that system ensures its continuity with the huge campaign funding provided by large companies (\$10.8-billion in 2020). The 50 richest Americans — who have wealth equivalent to half the country's people — are guaranteed control of the regime. With this foundation, they define the imperial strategies used to dictate lessons of democracy to the rest of the world.

Biden is poised to resume the traditional foreign policy tainted by his predecessor's outbursts. He will attempt in that environment the same return to "normality" that he promises internally. The media go along with that makeup.

The new resident of the White House underpins neoliberalism with some touches of progressivism in the agenda of minorities, feminism, and climate change. That same mixture will be instrumental in the foreign arena, surrounding the basic guidelines of the empire with more ornaments of friendly rhetoric. This line has been suggested by traditional State Department advisers (Nye, 2020). Biden will implement that combination by drawing on his half-century long experience in the interstices of Washington.

He has already placed the same team of Obama officials in key foreign policy positions, yet he will not simply be able to repeat the multilateral globalism of that administration. With the Trans-Pacific and Trans-Atlantic free trade agreements, Obama fostered a network of Asian alliances to surround China and a framework of agreements with Europe to isolate Russia. None of those agreements could be finalized before their brutal burial by Trump's mercantilist bilateralism. It is highly unlikely that Biden will be able to resume the preceding approach as the economic pillar of his imperial strategy.

To command the mega-trade agreements with Europe and Asia requires a highly efficient economy that the United States no longer manages. The dollar, high technology, and the Pentagon are not enough. Not even in the American hemisphere itself has Washington managed to implement a free trade strategy. It only achieved NAFTA 2.0 (CUSMA/USMCA/T-MEC) without reinstating any variant of the FTAA in the rest of the region.

On the other hand, the crisis of globalization persists, and Trump's preaching to confront commercial adversaries has permeated the electorate. There is a strong current of opinion that is hostile to the traditional globalism of the coastal elites. Added to this malaise is the Great Confinement generated by the pandemic and the unprecedented paralysis of transport and international trade. The confluence of obstacles to retaking multilateralism is very significant.

Biden will have to conceive a new pillar for his external program with another balance between Americanists and globalists. In the same way that Trump distanced himself from Bush's interventionism, Biden will have to come up with some cocktail more removed from the traditional Democratic format.



His first steps will aim to rebuild traditional relationships with NATO allies. He will try to heal the wounds left by his predecessor, taking up projects to deal with climate change (the Paris Agreement). He will seek to “decarbonize” the electricity sector with incentives for renewable energy and promotion of electric cars. But those initiatives do not solve the great dilemma of strategy vis-à-vis China.

In this area there are plenty of signs of continuity. Biden will intensify the pressure for a Pacific-Indian NATO (Dohert, 2020). Australia has already decided to participate in naval exercises with Japan and become the great regional aircraft carrier of the Pentagon. In turn, Taiwan has been provided with novel air weapons, and India is giving signs of approval to harassment in the China Sea (Donnet, 2020).

The new president will try to bring Europe into this campaign. He is preparing to suture the wounds left by Trump, taking advantage of the new climate of adversity toward China that is emerging among the elites of the Old Continent. The European Union has designated the eastern giant as a “strategic competitor,” and the governments of

Germany, France, and England are negotiating the veto of Huawei in their 5G networks. Macron has just appointed a French representative to the warmongering quartet the Pentagon has formed in Asia (the Quad).

But no one yet knows how NATO will be financed, and the list of issues of conflict with Europe is very extensive. It includes the US position on Brexit and clarification on the Trumpian Anglo-American free trade agreement project. The position of the State Department regarding the gas pipeline that will connect Germany with Russia is also pending.

Biden subscribes to the pro-Israel fanaticism of his predecessor, but Europe encourages a more balanced counterweight to the Arab world. He will have to decide whether he maintains the aggressive pressure on Iran, or on the contrary, re-establishes the nuclear treaty promoted by companies in Germany and France.

These definitions will influence Biden's war strategy. He will have to choose between the troop shortfall that characterized Trump or the interventionism that Obama-Clinton favoured. Shoring up hybrid wars or rearmament for major conflagrations involves another weighty decision. But in any of these variants, he is ready to insist on the imperial project of American recovery.

Gridlock in Ideology

Biden is likely to return to the banner of human rights as a justification for imperial policy. This cover has traditionally been used to mask intervention operations. Trump abandoned those messages and simply opted for outrageous claims with no pretense of credibility.

The pressure on China that Biden envisions will surely include some allusion to the lack of democracy. In that case, he will broadcast condemnations of the same outrages that are carried out in countries associated with Washington. What is not said about Saudi Arabia, Colombia, or Israel would occupy the forefront of questions to Beijing.

Biden would replace the crude accusations of unfair competition or coronavirus fabrication with criticism of the absence of freedom of speech and assembly. Perhaps he will also point to Chinese responsibility in the deterioration of the environment, to entice his subordinate European accomplice.

But it will not be easy to put China on the list of countries affected by a tyranny. Human rights imperialism has habitually been used to protect small (or medium) nations. In these cases, the ineffectiveness of a "failed state" and the consequent need for humanitarian relief are highlighted. That was the cover for the attacks on Somalia, Haiti, Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya.

The invaders never explain the selectivity of that patronage. They exclude countless countries subject to the same anomalies. Furthermore, they disqualify the "rescued" population, presenting it as a crowd incapable of managing its own destiny.

The containment of massacres stemming from ethnic, religious, or tribal confrontations has been another pretext for intervention. It has been used in Africa and the Balkans, alleging the need to contain massacres between estranged populations. In these cases, as well, it has been assumed that only a foreign armed force can pacify the peoples in conflict.

But that imperial patronage contrasts with the frequent inability to arbitrate one's own internal conflicts. Nobody suggests external mediation to resolve those tensions. The essence of imperialism lies precisely in the self-assigned right to intervene in another country, but to manage problems that are home-made without any foreign interference.

So also with the prosecution of the guilty. Defendants from peripheral countries are subject to rules of international law, which do not apply to their First World peers. Milosevic may face a court, but Kissinger is invariably exempt from that misfortune.

With this conduct, the United States updates the heap of hypocrisy inherited from Great Britain. In the 19th century, the English fleet harassed the international slave trade with libertarian arguments, which covered up its purpose to control the entirety of maritime transport. Washington hoists a similar banner and forgets the monumental disasters produced by the powers self-conceived as saviours of humanity. Such interventions often worsen the scenarios they promised to amend.

If Biden tries to pick up on that old liberal script, it will add to the loss of credibility that currently affects the United States. The official discourse of human rights is worn out. It was the great flag of the Second World War and lost consistency during McCarthyism. It reappeared with the implosion of the USSR but was again peeled off by the outrages of Bush and the complicities of Obama.

This applies as well to the banner of democracy, which in the US imperial variant has always combined universalism with exceptionality. With the first pillar the providential missionary role of the primary power was justified, and with the second, the occasional isolationist retreat.

The mythology that Washington cultivates mixes a call for planetary leadership ("the world is destined to follow us") with messages of protection of its own territory ("don't get the country involved in external causes"). From that mixture there has emerged the self-image of the United States as an active military force, but subject to operations requested, paid for, or begged for by the rest of the world (Anderson, 2016).

The interventionist and isolationist facets always had divergent bases in the mystifications of the elites of the coasts and the prejudices of the US interior. Both currents have complemented, merged, and fractured again. That counterpoint was updated by the globalists against the Americanists, and now, by Biden against Trump.

But both sides are sustained by the same immemorial obsession with security, in a country curiously privileged by geographical protection. The fear of external aggression reached peaks of paranoia during the tension with the USSR and resurfaced with waves of irrational panic during the recent "war on terrorism."

The US imperial ideology faces the same difficulties as the Americanist conception of the world. Both extol the values of capitalism, prioritize individualism, idealize competition, glorify profit, mystify risk, praise enrichment, and justify inequality.

These principles consolidated postwar American hegemony and achieved some additional survival under neoliberalism. But they are no longer sustained by the economic primacy of North America and have been transformed by their reconversion into ideals of other capitalist classes in the world. American myths do not have the pre-eminence of the past (Boron, 2019).

In the second half of the 20th century, US imperialism supplemented coercion with an ideology that gained prominence in language and culture. That influence persists but with modalities that are more autonomous of the US matrix, so attempts at imperial recomposition must deal with this fact. •

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