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Trump and the Decline of American Unipolarity

By Vijay Prashad
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Reactions to Donald Trump’s election as President of the United States oscillate between great trepidation and great mockery. Will Donald Trump do something outlandish—something with terrible consequences—or will what he does bring discredit on himself? Uncertainty dogs the next US president and his administration. The old establishment seems sidelined and the “deep state” appears bewildered.

The Bush Years

George W. Bush had evoked similar feelings of fear and hilarity, although his administration seemed handpicked by the establishment and Bush made no noises about changing the broad parameters of the world order. There was, from Bush, no gesture against the European Union or

NATO nor against the major trade agreements or the security arrangements. That Bush would illegally invade Iraq in 2003, preside over the emergence of the BRICS in trade discussions, and stand—a deer in the headlights—as the Western financial system metastasized was not entirely predictable when he took office.

What had become clear during Bush's eight years was that the United States was no longer the first amongst equals and that US-driven unipolarity was slowly unraveling. Russia, devastated in the first decade after the fall of the USSR, had rebuilt its military strength through high commodity prices and was more confident in its dealing with other powers. China's economic ascent in the decade of the 1990s gradually provided its leadership with the urgency to change the geopolitical balance of power. India, Brazil and South Africa—disadvantaged by the global economic rules—pushed for their own interests in the multilateral forums.

These powers, i.e. the BRICS, exerted themselves at different tempos against the unipolar set-up. It was Russia and China, with an assertive Latin America, that seemed prepared to challenge the West for the right to set trade rules and to claim territorial sovereignty over parts of the world far from their own boundaries.

The Obama Years

Barack Obama's decidedly more attractive personality could not, of course, clean up Bush's messes. He was not able to settle the contradictions opened up by Bush's wars in West Asia, nor was he able to control the ambitions of Russia and China.

Not that Obama did not try, for Obama's White House drove a fierce policy to engage both ends of Eurasia—with NATO being pushed closer and closer to Russia's western border and US ships aggravating the Chinese in the South China Sea. It was under Obama that the US poked its stick into Russia's bear cave, provoking Russian intervention into the Crimea. Attempts to get the Chinese to revalue their currency to help a spluttering US domestic economy through threats about intellectual property piracy, currency manipulation, and internet hacking came to naught. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even egged on the Japanese to set aside an elected government so that its bases in Okinawa would remain—these bases being a challenge to the Chinese and Russians. The Chinese would not be swayed. Even the ships in the South China Sea did not scare the Chinese to do as Washington bid.

Europe, which has not recovered evenly from the great recession of 2007/08, was disadvantaged by a set of policies that it had endorsed. Bush's illegal war against Iraq (2003), famously supported by what Bush called "New Europe" and the United Kingdom, allowed Iran to flex its ambitions across West Asia. The US, then, tried to push Iran back to its borders with the Syria Accountability Act (2003), the Israeli war on Lebanon (2006) and the sanctions regime on Iran (2006).

Sanctions on Iran removed it from the ledger of suppliers of energy for Europe's market. When NATO destroyed Libya (2011), another major provider of energy slipped off the European map. NATO's eastward move created the crisis in Eastern Europe, which led to the sanctions on Russia (2014). The Kremlin moved closer to China and began to sell its energy to the Chinese.

Iran, Libya, and Russia were three major energy sources for Europe. Now, in the space of a decade, all three went off-line. Pressure on the Obama administration to undo the Iran isolation led to the Iran deal (2015). These European contradictions, rather than the principles of international law, pushed the Obama administration to do the Iran deal.

The Trump Years

How will Trump manage these important shifts in the world order, with the Russians and Chinese—and other parts of the Global South—in ascendance, and with the Europeans turning inwards and in disarray? Would he continue to pressure Russia and China with military force at the two ends of Eurasia?

It is clear that Trump is not as concerned as the “deep state” in the United States is about Russia’s return to the world stage. Whether he will be able to override the mainstream consensus that Russia is a grave threat to the United States remains to be seen. Threats against Russia for the alleged hacking of the Democrats will force Trump to respond in some way, either with sanctions or with some kind of secret intervention. How he will respond to the deep state’s rhetoric on Russia is an open question.

Trump is certainly incoherent in his views. He appears friendly to Russia but has great antipathy towards China, particularly on trade. Russia had tasted humiliation after the fall of the USSR (1991) and after its expulsion from the G7 (2014). Rather than go into the wilderness, Russia formed an enduring bond with the Chinese on military, economic, and diplomatic grounds. This bond is very strong and appears to be strengthening. Trump is hallucinating if he imagines that he can break the link between Russia and China—two powers with some harmony on their views of the world order, more harmony than during the early years of the Cold War before the Sino-Soviet break.

It will be difficult to force China to revalue its currency to the advantage of the United States. No previous administration, with US battle ships close to the Chinese coastline, has been able to force the Chinese into this—for China—suicidal policy. Trump, short of a war against China, will not be able to force them to act to benefit the US heartland. This is more rhetoric from Trump than policy.

The administration assembled by Trump is united by a great hatred of Iran. Will they be able to renege on the Iran nuclear deal and perhaps go to war against Iran?

It is unlikely that Trump will be able to even cast the deal aside. He will find no partners in Europe, where the energy shortfall has constrained policy options. There is no appetite in the European capitals for a return to sanctions. Neither Russia nor China—both of whom rely on Iran for their West Asia policy—will allow United Nations sanctions on Iran. Trump might want to go alone in his crusade against Iran, but he will not find many Arab allies—apart from a handful of Gulf monarchies—who would endorse such a war. Egypt, Algeria, and Iraq would be steadfast against it. Hezbollah, from Lebanon, would threaten Israel, which is not prepared for a return to hostilities on its northern perimeter. Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu enjoyed his

belligerent rhetoric, but it is clear that he hid behind Obama. Now he shall have no one to hide behind. Nor will Trump.

Harsh rhetoric against Mexico as an alibi for the weaknesses of the fortunes of ordinary Americans is not going to bear Trump much fruit. He has miscalculated on Mexico, believing perhaps that it is an isolated and poor country. Mexico is well attached to the agenda of the Global South on several major issues, namely Northern subsidy reform, Northern financial system reform, and renegotiation of the intellectual property regime that benefits Northern pharmaceutical and high-tech firms. Corn subsidies in the US and liberalized trade due to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) spurred the migration of impoverished Mexicans to the United States. Any change of the trade regime would have to take into consideration the advantages to Northern capital of the liberalized trade environment.

Trump's call to renegotiate treaties is welcome news in many of the capitals of the South, but what they mean by renegotiation is very different. Mexico is a founding member of the G20 group of developing countries within the World Trade Organization (WTO), which held its own at the 2003 Cancun (Mexico) WTO ministerial meeting, where under the leadership of India, Brazil, and South Africa the G20 pushed back against the Northern agenda. Mexico has vacillated in the G20, but Trump's insults and his policies on immigration and trade might push Mexico into the front ranks of the G20. This would be welcome news to other Latin American states.

Even if the era of US unipolarity is now over, the period of US-driven imperialism is not at an end. The United States still possesses the largest military force, has tentacles across the planet through its bases and aircraft carriers, and is the biggest dealer of weapons. Power will be exercised in various forms by the United States to maintain its declining authority. Trump could very likely have a dangerous trigger finger. But fewer allies and less legitimacy might make it harder for him to pull that trigger. In the end, he might find himself more victim of the world than its assassin.