

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

ALFRED W. MCCOY

27.12.2024

The Rise of Trump, the Fall of Imperial America



Image by Paul Weaver.

Some 2,000 years ago, an itinerant preacher, Saul of Tarsus, was writing to a wayward congregation in Corinth, Greece. Curiously enough, his words still capture the epochal change that may await us just over history's horizon. "For now we see in a glass, darkly," he wrote. "Now I know in part, but then shall I know fully."

Indeed, mesmerized by a present filled with spellbinding events ranging from elections to wars, we, too, gaze into a darkened glass unable to see how the future might soon unfold before our eyes — a future full of signs that the four empires that have long dominated our world are all crumbling.

Since the Cold War ended in 1990, four legacy empires — those of China, France, Russia, and the United States — have exercised an undue influence over almost every aspect of international affairs. From the soft power of fashion, food, and sports to the hard power of

arms, trade, and technology, those four powers have, each in its own way, helped to set the global agenda for the past 35 years. By dominating vast foreign territories, both militarily and economically, they have also enjoyed extraordinary wealth and a standard of living that's been the envy of the rest of the world. If they now give way in a collective version of collapse, instead of one succeeding another, we may come to know a new world order whose shape is as yet unimaginable.

An Empire Once Called *Françafrique*

Let's start with the French neocolonial imperium in northern Africa, which can teach us much about the way our world order works and why it's fading so fast. As a comparatively small state essentially devoid of natural resources, France won its global power through the sort of sheer ruthlessness — cutthroat covert operations, gritty military interventions, and cunning financial manipulations — that the three larger empires are better able to mask with the aura of their awesome power.

For 60 years after its formal decolonization of northern Africa in 1960, France used every possible diplomatic device, overt and covert, fair and foul, to incorporate 14 African nations into a neo-colonial imperium covering a quarter of Africa that critics called *Françafrique*. The architect of that post-colonial confection was Jacques Foccart, a Parisian “man of the shadows.” From 1960 to 1997, using 150 agents in the Africa section of the state's secret service, he managed that neocolonial enterprise as France's “presidential adviser for Africa,” while cultivating a web of personal connections to presidential palaces across the northern part of that continent.

As part of that postcolonial empire, French paratroopers (among the world's toughest special forces) shuttled in and out of northern Africa, conducting more than 40 interventions from 1960 to 2002. Meanwhile, more than a dozen client states there shared autocratic leaders shrouded in vivid personality cults, systemic corruption, and state terror. In that way, Paris ensured the tenure of compliant dictators like Omar Bongo, president of the oil-rich country of Gabon from 1967 to 2009. Apart from exporting their raw materials almost exclusively to France, the firm economic foundation for *Françafrique* lay in a common currency, the CFA franc, which gave the French treasury almost complete fiscal control over its former colonies. From Paris's perspective, the aim of the game was the procurement of cut-rate commodities — minerals, oil, and uranium — critical for its industrial economy. To that end, Foccart proved a master of the dark arts, dispatching mercenaries and assassins in covert operations meant to eternally maximize French influence.

The exemplary state in *Françafrique* was undoubtedly Gabon, then a poor country of just a half-million people rich in forestry concessions, uranium mines, and oil fields. When the country's first president was being treated for fatal cancer in a Paris hospital in 1967, Foccart manipulated its elections to install Omar Bongo, a French intelligence veteran, who was then only 31.

As political opposition to his corrupt rule intensified in 1971, Foccart's office dispatched notorious assassin and mercenary Bob Denard. When a key opposition leader arrived home from the movies one night, "Mr. Bob" stepped from the shadows and gunned the man down in front of his wife and child. The Foccart network also secured Bongo's rule by training the presidential guard and forming a security force to protect French oil facilities there.

Through rigged elections in 1993, 1998, and 2005, Bongo clung to power while French officials enabled his graft, facilitating more than \$100 million yearly in illicit payments from France's leading oil company. When he finally died in 2009, his son Ali-Ben Bongo succeeded him, inheriting 33 luxury properties in France worth \$190 million and a country a third of whose population lived in misery on the equivalent of two dollars a day. But in August 2023, after one too many rigged elections, Ali Bongo was finally toppled by a military coup, ending a dynasty that had lasted nearly six decades.

As it turned out, his downfall would be a harbinger for the fate of *Françafrique*. During the preceding decade, France had deployed some 5,000 elite troops to fight Islamic terrorists in six nations in Africa's Sahel region, an arid strip of territory extending across the continent just south of the Sahara Desert.

By 2020, however, nationalist consciousness against repeated transgressions of their sovereignty was rising in many of those relatively new countries, putting pressure on French forces to withdraw. As its troops were expelled from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, Russia's secretive Wagner Group of mercenaries moved in and, by 2023, had become increasingly active there. Just last month, the foreign minister of Chad announced that it was time for his country "to assert its sovereignty" by expelling French forces from their last foothold in the Sahel, effectively ending *Françafrique* after 60 years of neocolonial dominion.

In those same months, Chad also expelled a U.S. Special Forces training unit, while nearby Niger cancelled U.S. Air Force access to Air Base 201 (which it had built at a cost of \$110 million), leaving Russia the sole foreign power active in the region.

Russia's Fragile Empire

While France's African imperium was driven by economic imperatives, the revival of Russia's empire, starting early in this century, has been all about geopolitics. During the last

years of the Cold War, from 1989 to 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, with Moscow losing an empire of seven Eastern European satellite states and 15 “republics” that would become 22 free-market democratic nations.

In 2005, calling the collapse of the Soviet Union the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century,” Russian President Vladimir Putin set about reclaiming parts of the old Soviet sphere — invading Georgia in 2008, when it began flirting with NATO membership; deploying troops in 2020-2021 to resolve a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan; and dispatching thousands of Russian special forces to Kazakhstan in central Asia in 2022 to gun down pro-democracy protesters challenging a loyal Russian ally.

Moscow’s main push, however, was into the old Soviet sphere of Eastern Europe, where, after a rigged election in 2020, Putin backed Belarus strongman Alexander Lukashenko in crushing the democratic opposition, making Minsk a virtual client state. Meanwhile, he pressed relentlessly against Ukraine after the ouster of his loyal surrogate there in the 2014 Maidan “color revolution” — first seizing Crimea, then arming separatist rebels in the eastern Donbas region adjacent to Russia, and finally invading the country with nearly 200,000 troops in 2022.

But perhaps Putin’s boldest move was a little-understood geopolitical flanking maneuver against NATO, played out across two continents. Starting in 2015, Moscow hopped over the NATO barrier of Turkey by setting up a naval base and an airfield in northern Syria and began a bombing campaign that would soon reduce cities like Aleppo to rubble to keep its ally, President Bashar al-Assad, in power in Damascus. In 2021, Moscow skipped over another U.S. ally, Israel, and began supplying Egypt with two dozen of its advanced Sukhoi-35 jet fighters so its airmen could compete with Israelis flying American F-35s. Completing Russia’s push into the region, Putin built upon shared interests as oil exporters to befriend Saudi Arabia’s uncrowned leader, Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Using his Syrian bases as a springboard, his final geopolitical gambit was a pivot across North Africa from Sudan to Mali conducted covertly by a notorious crew of Russian mercenaries called the Wagner Group.

In recent weeks, however, Putin’s geopolitical construct suffered a serious blow when rebels suddenly swept into Damascus, sending Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad fleeing to Moscow and ending his family’s more than 50 years in power. After suffering a stunning 700,000 casualties and the loss of 5,000 armored vehicles in three years of constant warfare in Ukraine, Russia had simply stretched its geopolitical reach too far and no longer had sufficient aircraft to defend Assad. In fact, there are signs that Russia is pulling out of its

Syrian bases and so losing a key pivot for power projection in the Mediterranean and northern Africa.

Meanwhile, as NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte condemned the “escalating campaign of Russia’s hostile actions” and its attempt to “crush our freedom and way of life,” Western Europe began ramping up its defense industries and cutting its economic ties to Russia. If Senator John McCain was right when, in 2014, he called Russia “a gas station masquerading as a country,” then the rapid switch to alternative energy across Eurasia could, within a decade, rob Moscow of the finances for further adventures, reducing Russia, now also harried by economic sanctions, to a distinctly secondary regional power.

The Limits of China’s Power

For the past 30 years, China’s transformation from a poor peasant society into an urban industrial powerhouse has been the single most dramatic development in modern history. Indeed, its relentless rise as the planet’s top industrial power has given it both international economic influence and formidable military power, exemplified by a trillion-dollar global development program and the world’s largest navy. Unlike the other empires of our era that have expanded via overseas bases and military intervention, China has only acted militarily on contiguous territory — invading Tibet in the 1950s, claiming the South China Sea during the past decade, and endlessly maneuvering (ever more militarily) to subdue Taiwan. Had China’s unprecedented annual growth rate continued for another five years, Beijing might well have attained the means to become the globe’s preeminent power.

But there are ample signs that its economic juggernaut may have reached its limits under a Communist command-economy. Indeed, it now appears that, in clamping an ever-tighter grip on Chinese society by pervasive surveillance, the Communist Party may be crippling the creativity of its talented citizenry.

After a rapid 10-fold expansion in university education that produced 11 million graduates by 2022, China’s youth unemployment suddenly doubled to 20% and continued climbing to 21.3% a year later. In a panic, Beijing manipulated its statistical methods to produce a lower figure and began fabricating numbers to conceal a youth unemployment rate that may already have reached 30% or even 40%. The potential power of youth to break the hold of the communist state was evident in November 2022, when protests against zero-Covid lockdowns erupted in at least 17 cities across China, with countless thousands of youths chanting, “Need human rights, need freedom,” and calling for President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party to “step down.”

The country's macroeconomic statistics are growing ever grimmer as well. After decades of rip-roaring growth, its gross domestic product, which peaked at 13%, has recently slumped to 4.6%. Adding to its invisible economic crisis, by 2022 the country's 31 provinces had shouldered crippling public debts that, the *New York Times* reported, reached an extraordinary "\$9.5 trillion, equivalent to half the country's economy," and some 20 major cities have since leaped into the abyss by spending wildly to give the economy a pulse. Seeking markets beyond its flagging domestic economy, China, which already accounted for 60% of global electric vehicle purchases, is launching a massive export drive for its cut-rate electric cars which is about to crash headlong into rising tariff walls globally.

Even China's daunting military may be a bit of a paper tiger. After years of cloning foreign weapons, Beijing's arms exports have reportedly dropped in recent years after buyers found them technologically inferior and unreliable on the battlefield. And keep in mind that, even as its military technology has continued to advance, China hasn't fought a war in nearly 50 years.

Nonetheless, President Xi keeps promising the Chinese people that Taiwan's reunification with "the motherland is a historical inevitability." However, should Beijing launch a war on Taiwan, whether to fulfill its promise or distract its people from growing economic problems, the result could prove catastrophic. Its inexperience with combined arms — the complex coordination of air, sea, and land forces — could lead to disastrous losses during any attempted amphibious invasion, and even a victory could do profound damage to its export economy.

The End of the American Century

When it comes to that other great imperial force on Planet Earth, let's face it, Donald Trump's second term is likely to mark the end of America's near-century as the world's preeminent superpower. After 80 years of near-global hegemony, there are arguably five crucial elements necessary for the preservation of U.S. world leadership: robust military alliances in Asia and Europe, healthy capital markets, the dollar's role as the globe's reserve currency, a competitive energy infrastructure, and an agile national security apparatus.

However, surrounded by sycophants and suffering the cognitive decline that accompanies aging, Trump seems determined to exercise his untrammled will above all else. That, in turn, essentially guarantees the infliction of damage in each of those areas, even if in different ways and to varying degrees.

America's unipolar power at the end of the Cold War era has, of course, already given way to a multipolar world. Previous administrations carefully tended the NATO alliance in Europe,

as well as six overlapping bilateral and multilateral defense pacts in the sprawling Indo-Pacific region. With his vocal hostility toward NATO, particularly its crucial mutual-defense clause, Trump is likely to leave that alliance significantly damaged, if not eviscerated. In Asia, he prefers to cozy up to autocrats like China's Xi or North Korea's Kim Jong-un instead of cultivating democratic allies like Australia or South Korea. Add to that his conviction that such allies are freeloaders who need to pay up and America's crucial Indo-Pacific alliances are unlikely to prosper, possibly prompting South Korea and Japan to leave the U.S. nuclear umbrella and become thoroughly independent powers.

Convinced above all else of his own "genius," Trump seems destined to damage the key economic components of U.S. global power. With his inclination to play favorites with tariff exemptions and corporate regulation, his second term could give the term "crony capitalism" new meaning, while degrading capital markets. His planned tax cuts will add significantly to the federal deficit and national debt, while degrading the dollar's global clout, which has already dropped significantly in the past four years.

In defiance of reality, he remains wedded to those legacy energy sources, coal, oil, and natural gas. In recent years, however, the cost of electricity from solar and wind power has dropped to half that of fossil fuels and is still falling. For the past 500 years, global power has been synonymous with energy efficiency. As Trump tries to stall America's transition to green energy, he'll cripple the country's competitiveness in countless ways, while doing ever more damage to the planet.

Nor do his choices for key national security posts bode well for U.S. global power. If confirmed as defense secretary, Peter Hegseth, a Fox News commentator with a track record of maladministration, lacks the experience to begin to manage the massive Pentagon budget. Similarly, Trump's choice for director of national intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, has no experience in that highly technical field and seems prone to the sort of conspiracy theories that will cloud her judgment when it comes to accurate intelligence assessments. Finally, the nominee for FBI director, Kash Patel, is already promising to punish the president's domestic critics rather than pursue foreign agents through counterintelligence, the bureau's critical responsibility.

By the time Trump retires (undoubtedly to accolades from his devoted followers), he will have compressed two decades of slow imperial decline into a single presidential term, effectively ending Washington's world leadership significantly before its time.

A New World Order?

So, you might ask, if those four empires do crumble or even collapse, what comes next? The forces of change are so complex that I doubt anyone can offer a realistic vision of the sort of world order (or disorder) that might emerge. But it does seem as if we are indeed approaching a historical watershed akin to the end of World War II or the close of the Cold War, when an old order fails with utter finality and a new order, whether redolent with promise or laden with menace, seems inevitable.

DECEMBER 26, 2024

This piece first appeared on [TomDispatch](#).