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US Foreign Policy

# How many more wars?

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**Somewhere in the depths of his prodigious ignorance, it evidently dawned on Donald Trump that his national security advisor and the Secretary of State are pushing the United States toward war with Iran. That's exactly the kind of ruinous conflict that Trump said he'd avoid when he became President – but on an even larger scale than his predecessors' disastrous adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.**

Confusion rules. One day's headlines indicate that war somewhere is imminent, the next day's that tensions are easing, depending on the reading of the latest tweets. With the chaotic swirl of messages coming from this administration – on Iran, on North Korea, on Venezuela, on trade with China, Japan and Europe, and so much more – the actual odds of threats turning into reality are frankly imponderable. Certainly, the U.S. population does not want war anywhere. But what are the forces that can resist and block a road to catastrophe?

After the departure of Trump's initial foreign policy team and many of their replacements, strategic power positions fell to the likes of John Bolton, a discredited neoconservative architect of those earlier debacles, who can see one last desperate chance for his long-dreamed ambitions of "transforming the Middle East" through U.S. military and political muscle.

A look at the multiple fronts on which U.S. imperialism is operating – in particular the Middle East, Latin America and the growing confrontation with China – shows widely differing scales of strategic importance, but with some common elements.

One of the most important and too little appreciated facts is the brutal use of economic sanctions against less powerful countries designated as enemy regimes. While a handful of Democratic politicians have spoken in opposition to U.S. invasion, hardly any have called attention to the murderous effects of sanctions – which as we know from the example of Iraq are not a substitute for war, but preparation for it.

## Latin America: Imperial Sadism

The sanctions against two disobedient Latin American states, Venezuela and Cuba – two-thirds of Bolton's absurdist "troika of tyranny," along with Nicaragua – are basically acts of imperial sadistic cruelty. A leading international economist, Jeffrey Sachs, has estimated that U.S. economic sanctions against Venezuela have caused 40,000 excess deaths. This comes on top of the miseries caused by the implosion of the "Bolivarian revolution" under the weight of collapsing oil prices, bureaucratic mismanagement and corruption.

Trump's reimposed sanctions on Cuba have also seriously exacerbated the hardships of life there. The squalid domestic political calculation behind torturing Venezuela and Cuba is to strengthen the rightwing exile support for the Republicans in Florida, whose thin majority is threatened by the influx of Puerto Ricans fleeing the island's climate change driven hurricane calamities.

Tactically, strangling Venezuela was to induce an anti-Maduro military coup and possibly civil war. As it turned out, the coup spectacularly failed either to fracture the officer command or to bring civilian masses into the streets. Washington's threats of military intervention may have been mainly bluster, but one never knows.

Strategically, Washington's goal is to align Venezuela and every major South American country with the new far-right bloc headed by Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil and the reactionary regimes in Ecuador and Colombia along with Argentina. Getting Venezuela's huge oil reserves into the clutches of U.S. corporations would also be a huge prize.

Still, nothing about this is necessary for imperialism. Venezuela today is no "revolutionary threat" to the United States. The populist inspirational example that Hugo Chavez represented has long since dissipated. Cuba is no threat either, let alone Nicaragua in its present immiserated condition.

The threat actually arises from the danger of U.S.-instigated civil war in Venezuela. That nightmare could not only bring a new refugee migration, but possibly spill into Colombia and reignite the long civil war there. While Washington's cynical disregard of millions of Latin American lives knows no limits, other countries (Mexico and Uruguay) in defiance of U.S. orders are working for a negotiated Venezuelan political solution, which is probably the least bad outcome in the desperate circumstances.

## Middle East: The Next Catastrophe?

Much more than the headline-grabbing military movements — after all, 1500 more U.S. troops to the Middle East is hardly a game-changer — it's the U.S. campaign to strangle Iran's economy and oil industry that threatens to touch off the next Middle East conflagration.

The second prong of Trump's policy, Jared Kushner's pending "deal of the century," aims at the final liquidation of the Palestinian people's struggle for self-determination.

"Reducing Iran's oil exports to zero," the policy proclaimed by Secretary of State Pompeo, is intended to provoke a response from the Iranian regime that would provide the pretext for a U.S. attack. Threatening reprisals against any country's businesses or banks doing business with Iran is also an attempt by the U.S. administration to show that it truly rules the planet.

To the extent that one can interpret Trump's befogged brain through the twitstorms, he doesn't appear to want an actual U.S. war with Iran. On the record, however, Bolton certainly does — and so do Israeli prime minister Netanyahu and Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Mohammad bin Salman, even if they're not planning to put their own forces into the battlefield.

The anti-Iran campaign has to be viewed with other regional initiatives to restore the domination that the United States lost in the wake of the Iraqi and Syrian wars. Shortly, the repulsive Kushner is supposed to reveal the plan he's developed, along with his buddy bin Salman, which anticipates dividing the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) into isolated bantustans. Promises of investments will be made (to be broken later in classic Trump fashion) in these miserable remnants of Palestine, enabling Israeli annexation of whatever land and resources it wants.

The announcement of this "solution" may be held up by the impasse between Israel's ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious reactionary factions. In any case, the resulting prospect is for a bitter struggle against Israeli apartheid under more difficult conditions than in South Africa, quite likely lasting for decades to come. All kinds of liberal Zionists, including leading Democrats of course, will say it's the Palestinians' fault for "rejecting the two-state solution" that Israel never actually offered.

Will the administration's provocations lead to a shooting war with Iran? It's one of those low-probability events, but

carrying almost unimaginable possible consequences unless the brakes are applied somewhere along the line:

• The escalation of Saudi Arabia's U.S.-backed genocidal war in Yemen.

• The violent destabilization of Iraq, exposing U.S. forces to attack and also creating exactly the conditions for the reincarnation of the "Islamic State."

• Israel attacking pro-Iranian Hezbollah forces in Lebanon or, if the Iranian regime feels itself under terminal threat its rulers authorizing Hezbollah military strikes on Israeli targets.

• In that scenario, Israeli extreme nationalist and religious right forces which are only partly controlled by the Netanyahu government and the military might unleash longstanding plans for large-scale ethnic cleansing and expulsion in the OPTs. Whether brought about by accident or design, these are extreme scenarios but hardly something that the world should be prepared to risk.

## China: Looming Confrontation

If the Trump regime's gambits in Latin America are mainly driven by sadistic cruelty and opportunistic calculation, and in the Middle East by the kind of strategic arrogant overreach that we've seen before with ruinous results, there is a political-economic and potentially military conflict that actually does pose a threat to U.S. hegemony: the rapidly growing confrontation with China.

The multi-dimensional complexity of this conflict is beyond our scope here. Its most highly publicized aspect, the trade war that Trump himself has pushed for decades, isn't the most important part. Tariffs grab the headlines, but in many respects this is the 21st century version of a classic rivalry between a rising power and the established imperial one.

In the 20th century, over the course of two world wars, the United States supplanted Britain, France and other European states to become the superpower of capitalist imperialism. Today, it is challenged for global domination by a Chinese power with a hybrid economy combining a private capitalist system with a single-party regime which, however, faces its own internal weaknesses and contradictions.

The first approximation to understanding the U.S.-China conflict is that it has nothing to do with right and wrong or a "rules-based global order." Rather, both sides tell much of the truth about the other's misdeeds and lie about their own.

Yes, in the context of China's political system where the Communist Party regime makes and enforces the rules, its corporations' ascendancy in high-tech and especially 5G technology constitutes a security threat to every country that signs up for it. Yes, it's true that its "Belt and Road" project includes extending huge development loans to countries and seizing their strategic ports and assets when the projects fail and the loans can't be repaid.

It's also true that the United States has used its technological and military supremacy to dominate the Asian Pacific area for generations, seeking to control China's borders with potential hostile neighbors (notably India). Capitalist powers for centuries have looted not only the raw materials but the technical know-how of subjugated peoples and nations. One might say that the West invented intellectual property theft, and the Chinese "stole" it.

## How many more wars?

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There's not just commercial and technological rivalry, but potentially military as well, and not only in the South China Sea. U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo, in his jaw-dropping speech to the Arctic Council, proclaimed that the rapid melting of Arctic ice opens up great shipping and resource extraction opportunities that the United States is determined to exploit and protect by military as well as commercial means.

While both China and Russia of course have their eyes on the same prize, Pompeo's speech, in its own right, stands out as a suicide note for humanity. This administration celebrates the very climate change that's destroying the agricultural base of Central American countries, accelerating their populations' flight northward toward Trump's immigration detention centers.

The idea that a border wall or punitive tariffs against Mexico will stop desperate refugees makes as much sense as the notion that sea walls and censoring climate science will prevent our coastal cities from being inundated by rising oceans and supercharged hurricanes.

Yet while the urgent need for a grassroots antiwar and ecological upsurge has never been greater, it is not presently clear what forces are capable of mobilizing it. The growth of Green parties' strength in Europe, student strike actions against government and corporate climate change inaction, and the new socialist activism in the United States are at least hopeful signs.

"How many more wars?" depends, in any case, not only on the savagery of the Trump gang but also on more profound issues that will persist well after the big twit has departed the scene. The fights to stop crippling starvation sanctions on Iran, Venezuela and Cuba; to block the drive toward insane wars; to force real, not symbolic action against the destruction of civilization by climate change; and to create a socialist future without imperialist rivalries and war are all inextricably connected.

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