

THE STATE OF THE EMPIRE

Some Reflections on the Geopolitical Situation

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My attempt is to give or rather get an overview of the geopolitical situation by an examination of the state of the Empire today. This is because the projects and policies of US Empire largely determine developments in international politics today.

Continuing Imperial Geo-strategy

If anybody had hopes that the replacement of a Republican President by a Democratic President would reform, if not begin to dismantle the Empire, their hopes have been totally belied. The continuation of the Bush era policies, military doctrines and strategies by President Obama, is deeply disquieting but not surprising. In the wake of the Bush administration's disastrous neoconservative ideologies, the Obama administration initially appeared to be seeking to realize the liberal international and diplomatic way of relating to the world. But soon it was clear that US is going to be an aggressive imperial power no matter whom it elects as president, and that what is called 'neo-conservatism' is merely an extreme version of normal American assumption of supremacy, one that explicitly promotes and heightens US's routine practice of empire. Thus there is no fundamental break in foreign policy between the Bush and Obama regimes. The strategic goals and the imperatives of the US imperium remain the same as do principal theatres and means of operation.

One noticeable aspect of continuity is with reference to views on war and peace. If Obama was the Commander-in-Chief of two wars when he received the Nobel Peace Prize for Peace, he can now claim to be C-in-C of one more, Libya, though it is a war in denial. In fact a close analysis of the new Libyan adventure of the USA and NATO brings out clearly the continuing imperial geo-strategy.

The Discourse on War and Peace

First, on war and peace. The scrutiny of the term 'just peace' is especially important in the context of the confusion deliberately created by the prevailing discourse on war and peace, a discourse reflecting the hegemonic definitional power of the USA. Claiming 'victory' in the war against Iraq while speaking to the workers of the Boeing factory, President Bush declared, "We are redefining war on our terms". He added, "The manufacturers of weapons are the peacemakers".

The confusion was evident in President Obama's speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. He had just dispatched additionally 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. He was obviously on the horns of a dilemma. But he came out in favour of war, not peace. He said, "There will be times when nations will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justifiable." Claims about necessity and moral justification of any war are problematic, especially when such claims are made by the rulers who wage seemingly endless wars. The distance from the necessity of war to the inevitability of war was considerably shortened by the new military doctrines and strategies of the USA under President Bush.

Obama added in his Oslo speech, "Yes, the instruments of war do have a role in preserving peace", uncomfortably reminding us of Bush's statement to the Boeing workers. In the speech Obama spoke of the "biggest and strongest military alliance in the world", the

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). “Peace requires responsibility. Peace entails sacrifice. That is why NATO continues to be indispensable.” Obama was glorifying a military alliance which has the most aggressive strategic doctrine. He was only following the path of his predecessor Bush who had declared that “Pentagon is the biggest force for freedom in the world.” The occupation of Afghanistan by the USA and NATO still continues. In Iraq there will be continued US military presence and a number of bases. Even when imperial wars end, imperial bases continue.

In his speech at the National Defense University in Washington, trying to justify military action against Libya, President Obama said, “I will never hesitate to use our military swiftly, decisively and unilaterally when necessary to defend our people, our homeland, our allies and our core interests.” He added other occasions for intervention “when our safety is not directly threatened but our interests and our allies’ are”. In this secondary list he lumped everything from “preventing genocide” to “ensuring regional security” and “maintaining the flow of commerce”. Yes, Obama will take military action to maintain “the flow of commerce”. This was a reiteration of the Bush doctrine of preemption and preventive wars. If Bush thought of preventive wars even in case of presumed future, potential threats to the USA, Obama seems to believe that wars are necessary even when there is no threat to the USA now or in the future. The Libyan action of the Western powers is a war, albeit an undeclared one.

The Bush administration had redefined war objectives in terms of “changing the regime of an adversary state” and “occupying foreign territory until U.S. strategic objectives are met”. The United States and the NATO have manipulated and interpreted the Security Council resolution on Libya to suit their imperial objectives.

The Military Action against Libya and International Law

On 17th March 2011, the UN Security Council adopted a binding resolution (1973) with the stated goal to protect civilians in the domestic conflict in Libya. Operative paras 4 and 8 of the resolution authorize all member states individually or through regional organizations or arrangements to “undertake all necessary measures” for the protection of civilians and for the enforcement of a so-called no fly zone. To ‘authorize’ states to “use all necessary measures” in the enforcement of a legally binding resolution is an invitation to an arbitrary and arrogant exercise of power and makes the commitment of the UN to the international rule of law void of any meaning. The fact that the Security Council adopted the same approach, earlier in resolution 678 dealing with the situation between Iraq and Kuwait, in 1990 does not justify the present action in the context of the domestic conflict in Libya. “All necessary measures” have come to mean solely military action excluding the range of possibilities including mediation, negotiation and diplomacy.

While the objective of the Security Council resolution is clearly stated as protecting the civilians, the Western powers have made clear that their real political goal is regime change - ousting Muammar Gaddafi. Ironically by stating that Gaddafi has lost legitimacy, Western leaders are dramatically narrowing the space for a more peaceful removal of the Libyan leader. The one thing that the Europeans share is a seeming lack of exit strategy from a military action marketed as a no-fly zone to the goal of a regime change mirroring the Afghan and Iraq campaigns. Can regime change be sustained without occupation? Occupation is the highest form of dictatorship which Washington calls democracy.

As the military preparations of the size and magnitude employed in Libya are never improvised there is reason to believe, that the war on Libya as well as the armed insurrection against the regime were planned months prior to the Arab uprising. That is why the Libyan war has to be treated separately.

In Libya the Western powers have intervened in an internal conflict and taken sides in a civil war. There has been no threat to international peace and security from Libya.

Geo-strategic Significance

The name “Operation Odyssey Dawn” is very revealing. It identifies the strategic interest and direction of the war against Libya. The Odyssey is an ancient Greek epic by the poet Homer which recounts the voyage and trials of its hero. The main theme here is ‘return home’. The US and other imperialist powers are on their own odyssey of ‘return’ to Africa. That explains why the initiative was taken by Britain and France, the former colonial powers in Africa.

Events in Libya are not exclusive to the military theatre. There is a geopolitical and economic chess match at play between the West and China in a battle for Africa and with it the largest basket of national resources on earth. The US has already outlined its strategic agenda through the formation of the AFRICOM, a subset of the infamous neoconservative Project for a New American Empire (PMAC). Central to America’s strategic goals is to confront the increasing Chinese influence on the continent. Beijing has assessed that the Anglo-French-American bombing of Libya, apart from its myriad geopolitical implications, has risked millions of dollars to Chinese investments.

Africa Command represents a vital and crucial link for the global military deployment of the USA. Libya is one of the five African countries that have not been integrated into, which is to say subordinated to, the Africa Command. Others are Sudan, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe and Eritrea.

There are observers who note that the Mediterranean Sea is emerging as the main battlefield in the world superseding the Afghan-Pak war theatre and thus an important zone of the Empire. Libya is the only African nation bordering the Mediterranean which is not a member of NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue Programme. The Mediterranean has been historically one of the most important –if not the most important – strategically crucial sea and the only one whose waves lap the shores of three continents. The defeat and conquest of Libya, directly or by proxy, would secure a key outpost for the Pentagon and NATO on the Mediterranean Sea.

The NATO’s entry into Africa is a development that has serious consequences. Originally meant as an alliance to preserve peace and stability along the frontline between the now defunct USSR and the US-European alliance, NATO has now become the major arm of the Empire. It entered Asia through Afghanistan under a dubious authorization by the UN for the International Security Assistance Force. The use of NATO in these regions is further proof that its Cold War function is still active, the old chess pieces are still in place and its Western directors are not hiding the fact at all. The NATO master plan is to rule the Mediterranean as a NATO lake. Under these ‘optics’ (Pentagon speak) the Mediterranean is infinitely more important as a theatre than Afghanistan. NATO is essentially Pentagon rule over its European minions. In fact it is the claim by the US that it has the right to intervene militarily in any part of the world that buttresses the new mandate assumed by the NATO.

It should be noted that only a few members of the NATO are directly involved in the Libya campaign. An important ally of the USA and a prominent member of NATO Germany abstained in the voting in the Security Council resolution and do not participate in the campaign. The Bush doctrine of the “coalition of the willing” still prevails. The key point is that while Libya allows the biggest US-European multinational to plunder its oil wealth it did not become a strategic military asset of the Empire. The driving force of US empire building is military and not economic. (???)

The Nuclear Implications

The Libyan war raises important questions about US’s nuclear posture as well as nuclear disarmament. A critical issue that has been raised is whether the recent test of a B61-11 by the USA is ‘routine’ or was it envisaged by the Pentagon directly or indirectly in support of

Operation Odyssey Dawn implying the possible development of mini-nukes at some future stage of the Libya bombing campaign. In the Nuclear Posture Review of 2002, the Pentagon mentioned the need to test small “usable” nuclear weapons. Low yield nuclear weapons are presented as a means to building peace and preventing “collateral damage”.

The decision to use low-yield nuclear weapons (e.g. against Libya) no longer needs the authorization or even the permission of the Commander in Chief, the President. It is strictly a military decision. The new doctrine says that Command Control and Coordination (CCC) regarding the use of nuclear weapons should be ‘flexible’ allowing geographic combat commanders to decide if and when to use nuclear weapons.

The Libyan War raises sharp questions about the nuclear disarmament policy of the United States. North Korea’s foreign ministry has issued a statement condemning the Libyan invasion, claiming that the attack is a likely scenario when a country decides to give up its nuclear weapons. (Libya gave up its nuclear program in 2003). American, British and French forces are now attacking Gaddafi’s military. And uncomfortable questions linger. Would NATO be enforcing a no-fly zone if Gaddafi had not dismantled Libya’s nuclear program?. Does the current military action against Libya send a signal to “rogue states” like Iran that security gained by de-nuclearisation is anything but? The Iranian and North Korean leadership use the nuclear weapon program both to bolster its domestic political prestige and to deter an attack from the US.

It is ironic that just under eight years ago, Gaddafi specifically engaged in an action clearly intended to forestall US military action against his regime and despite that he is now under military attack from US and its allies. The impression may gain currency that the US lures or coerces nations into nuclear disarmament and then attack them.

The Arab Uprising

The Arab uprising is a genuine expression of a long-standing desire for greater freedoms as well as economic justice denied by generally autocratic regimes. The current evolving situation raises several important questions. What are the common factors if any behind the movement? What are the possible outcomes of the demand for political reforms? How will this ongoing struggle impact the outside world? How will this affect the struggle of the Palestinian people for independent statehood? Answers to these questions are complex and difficult given the diversity in history, culture and politics of the Arab world.

However certain observations can be made. These revolts have immediately performed a kind of ideological house-cleaning sweeping away the racist conceptions of a clash of civilizations that consign Arab policies to the past. The struggles for freedom and democracy and the way in which they are being waged have shattered the stereotypes and wrong images of the Arabs created by the West. The Arab street is vibrant and peaceful even when the repression continues with state terrorism.

In the last quarter of a century and more the political developments in the region have been largely shaped by the imperialist policies of the USA especially with a view to ensuring the “security” of Israel. The US has always followed a policy of double standard in the region as it has done in other parts of the world. In response to the Arab revolt too, this double standard. Washington has no difficulty with autocratic regimes as long as they are pro-American. Regime change means installing “friendly” regimes.

An understanding of U.S. imperial policy in the Middle East requires an analysis which contains three factors:

- (i) The power and influence of Israel and related power configuration on US political institutions.
- (ii) The capacity of the US empire to construct and instrumentalize Middle East client states and regimes

- (iii) An alliance with rightwing regimes and rulers to provide military bases, intelligence and political backing for the colonial occupation of Iraq and economic sanctions and if necessary war against Iran.

All these are under serious challenge by the Arab uprising.

The United States is intervening in the Arab uprising with a view to manipulating and fashioning it to suit its interests and promote those of Israel. Robert Gates on April 19 has identified three regimes only which denies freedom and human rights – Iran, Syria and Libya. They are prominent in the US list of countries for military action. It has started with Libya. In Gates' view other countries like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen etc are model democracies with freedom and human rights

Since all the other countries like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Jordan are all friendly to the US and keep US interests any revolt has to be suppressed; hence, the American approval for the cruel repression in Bahrain with the active involvement of the Saudi military. The implications of any military action against Syria are quite grave but such action cannot be ruled out.

One of the most salutary effects of the Arab uprising is the agreement between Fatah and Hamas for Palestinian unity. They have agreed to reconcile in a surprise Egyptian-brokered accord –also showing a changing role of Egypt - that enraged Israel and left US officials struggling to maintain their influence over Middle East peace negotiations. The power sharing deal which was hammered out includes the formation of a national unity government and a timetable for general election. As a Fatah leader stated, “At this stage we have the best weapon to face the occupation. This weapon is our national unity.” It is already clear that Israel will use any means including military action to subvert Palestinian unity.

It is quite possible that Palestinian Authority (PA) had already made a strategic decision to move away from the United States and put its fate more squarely in the hands of the UN. They might have assessed a declining influence of the US in the Middle East combined with attempts for increasing support for the beleaguered Israel.

Parallel to the apparent decline in American influence, many states have recently intensified their political support for a Palestinian state and criticism of Israel. More than half a dozen Latin American countries have recognized Palestine explicitly while the governments of France, Spain and Ireland have upgraded Palestinian diplomatic delegations in their countries with other European countries expected to follow suit. The PA expects recognition by the vast majority of member-states of the UN when it declares unilateral independence.

The Empire's "Global Sovereignty".

The commando action by the Obama administration in Pakistan in which Osama bin Laden was killed, raises many important questions but underlines the fact that the President is following faithfully the imperial doctrine about 'global sovereignty' and 'freedom of action' of the USA. Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Salman Bashie said that the US forces may have breached his country's sovereignty. “This violation of sovereignty and the modalities for combating terrorism raises certain legal and moral issues which fall in the domain of the international community”.

The explanation is found in *The National Defense Strategy of the United States, March 2005*. One of the main strategic objectives listed in the document is to “secure strategic access and retain global freedom of action.”

The Strategy suggests that Washington will not be reluctant to send its forces into other states that, in its opinion, “do not exercise their sovereignty responsibly” or that “use the principle of sovereignty as a shield behind which they claim to be free to engage in

activities that pose enormous threats to their citizens or the rest of the international community”.

This raises important questions about sovereignty. The strategy of preventive war is closely bound up with the new vitality of the “hegemonic international law nihilism” (Norman Peach) that is exhibited by the US administration. It is rooted in the idea that the US possesses global sovereignty and all national sovereignties are relative to it. “This notion of global sovereignty means that the USA will lay down international rules (e.g. as alliances or formation of blocs) determine what constitutes a crisis (a state of emergency), distinguish between friend and foe and make the resulting decision on the use of force. Only the USA is competent to use force anywhere in the world. This is one of the pillars of the *new grand strategy*, which is exemplified above all else by the concept of an exclusive right to preventive military action all over the world. Commitments to international alliances, and in particular to the United Nations are rejected as constituting a restriction of the USA’s freedom to act.” (Rainer Rilling)

Obama’s assertion that the Osama bin Laden-type operations will continue is a declaration that the global empire will retain ‘global sovereignty’ and ‘global freedom of action’ by military might.

Countervailing Powers

Despite the utopian perspectives by the ranks of neo-liberal globalist disciples, cadres of nations and trading alliances have been formed since 2000. BRICS, MENA and other emerging blocs are challenging the preeminence of the traditional Anglo-American and European dominance over the global market and cultural monopolies. Oil, gas, uranium and water feature prominently in this realignment of the global chessboard and with each additional theatre comes the risk of multi-regional wars. The imperium is under attack not only by adversaries but also by those who no longer accept the US economic and ideological models, especially in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007.

The global recession that began in the US in 2007 was perhaps the most significant event impacting the geopolitical environment over the last several years. It has challenged the present international structures and unsustainable corporate power. Moreover the geopolitical framework has changed, questioning the supremacy of the USA which however maintains its imperial character by its unrivalled military power.

BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - may offer a countervailing power to some features of the Empire but not in military terms. The Sanya declaration –the outcome document of the recent BRICS summit in China– demonstrated five of the largest emerging economies now have “a broad consensus” of views not only on key international economic and financial issues but also on certain international political issues. They demanded reform of financial institutions of global governance enabling developing nations to have a greater say in them.

On the political side two key issues deserve mention. BRICS has voiced support for a comprehensive reform of the United Nations, including the Security Council. On the Libyan crisis however, BRICS has managed to create an ample air of ambivalence. Prior to the Sanya summit four countries abstained on the Security Council resolution, thereby providing a cover for Western intervention, and one (South Africa) in fact supported the resolution. At the summit, however, all five member-states expressed support for avoiding the use of force and ensuring respect for the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a country. Earlier Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister of Russia termed Operation Odyssey Dawn, a medieval call to crusade and the Security Council resolution “defective and flawed”. Whether the BRICS will emerge as a counter-weight to the USA, especially with regard to its imperial pursuits is doubtful at present.

The current geopolitical situation poses many challenges to peace movements like Peace

for Life. These challenges define our tasks. Let me indicate some of them.

- Recover and recapture the full meaning of peace and critique formulations that do not reflect it
- expose and contest the continuation of imperial policies by the Obama regime,
- condemn violations of sovereignty and imperial military interventions,
- Affirm the aspirations of the Arab people for freedom and human dignity,
- Continue to be in solidarity with the Palestinian people and actively support them as they enter a new stage in their struggle for statehood.

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