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The Empire-Lovers Strike Back: Trump, Putin and the Post-Helsinki Uproar



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Q: What do the following wildly diverse people and institutions have in common: MSNBC's Rachel Maddow and Fox News' Shepard Smith, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, *The New York Times* and *The Weekly Standard*, *The National Review* and the *Daily Kos*?

A: All agree that Donald Trump's July 16 meeting and press conference with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki were, in Senator John McCain's words, "a tragic mistake," if not "treasonous" (the term used by former CIA director John Brennan). McCain declared that "the damage inflicted by President Trump's naivety, egotism, false equivalence, and

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sympathy for autocrats is difficult to calculate.” The chorus singing this same tune now ranges from liberal columnists like Charles M. Blow and Tom Friedman to unrepentant neo-cons like Max Boot, Republican Hawks like Newt Gingrich, and pretty much every former head of the CIA, DIA, and NSA still alive. A remarkable amalgam of left- and right-leaningpols and pundits, whose unity, however temporary, demands explanation.

On the surface, what accounts for the wide-ranging opposition to Trump’s “softness” toward Russia is a combination of contempt for the presidential Orange-utan and old-fashioned patriotism. Trump demonstrated once again in Helsinki that he is poorly prepared, egomaniacal, impetuous, and overly trusting of fellow authoritarians. And, as Brennan and others opined, he appears to be “in Putin’s pocket,” either because he owes his office to Russian electoral meddling, or because the GRU may have tapes of him cavorting with Russian working girls. Even before Helsinki, Trump displayed a notable aversion to criticizing Russian military intervention in Ukraine, Crimea, and Syria, nor did he seem unduly upset by Russian electoral shenanigans in the U.S. and Europe or thuggery toward Putin’s opponents.

Why, then, would a coalition of leftish and right-wing patriots *not* join in denouncing a leader who seemed to put Russia’s interests ahead of those of his own country? Sorry to say, things are not so simple. Look a bit more closely at what holds the anti-Trump foreign policy coalition together, and you will discover a missing reality that virtually no one will acknowledge directly: the existence of a beleaguered but still potent American Empire whose junior partner is Europe. What motivates a broad range of the President’s opponents, then, is not so much the fear that he is anti-American as the suspicion that he is anti-Empire.

Of course, neither liberals nor conservatives dare to utter the “E-word.” Rather, they argue in virtually identical terms that Trump’s foreign and trade policies are threatening the pillars of world order: NATO, the Group of Seven, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the OSCE, and so forth. These institutions, they claim, along with American military power and a willingness to use it when necessary, are primarily responsible for the peaceful, prosperous, free, and democratic world that we have all been privileged to inhabit since the Axis powers surrendered to the victorious Allies in 1945.

The fear expressed plainly by *The New York Times*’s David Leonhardt, a self-described “left-liberal,” is that “Trump wants to destroy the Atlantic Alliance.” Seven months earlier, this same fear motivated the arch-conservative *National Review* to editorialize that,

“Under Trump, America has retreated from its global and moral leadership roles, alienated its democratic allies, and abandoned the bipartisan defense of liberal ideals that led to more than 70 years of security and prosperity.” All the critics would agree with Wolfgang Ischinger, chair of the Munich Security Conference, who recently stated, “Let’s face it. Mr. Trump’s core beliefs conflict with the foundations of Western grand strategy since the mid-1940’s.”

“Western grand strategy,” of course, is a euphemism for U.S. global hegemony – world domination, to put it plainly. In addition to peace and prosperity (mainly for privileged groups in privileged nations), this is the same strategy which since 1945 has given the world the Cold War, the specter of a nuclear holocaust, and proxy wars consuming between 10 and 20 million lives in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Its direct effects include the overthrow of elected governments in Guatemala, Iran, Lebanon, Congo, Nigeria, Indonesia, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Granada, Ukraine, et al.; the bribery of public officials and impoverishment and injury of workers and farmers world-wide as a result of exploitation and predatory “development” by Western governments and mega-corporations; the destruction of natural environments and exacerbation of global climate change by these same governments and corporations; and the increasing likelihood of new imperialist wars caused by the determination of elites to maintain America’s global supremacy at all costs. It is interesting that most defenders of the Western Alliance (and its Pacific equivalent: the more loosely organized anti-Chinese alliance of Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea) virtually never talk about American hegemony or the gigantic military apparatus (with more than 800 U.S. bases in 60 or so nations and a military-industrial complex worth trillions) that supports it. Nor is the subject of empire high on Mr. Trump’s list of approved twitter topics, even when he desecrates NATO and other sacred cows of the Alliance. There are several reasons for this silence, but the most important, perhaps, is the need to maintain the pretense of American moral superiority: the so-called “exceptionalist” position that inspires McCain to attack Trump for “false equivalency” (the President’s statement in Helsinki that both Russia and the U.S. have made mistakes), and that leads pundits left and right to argue that America is not an old-style empire seeking to dominate, but a new-style democracy seeking to liberate.

The narrative you will hear repeated ad nauseum at both ends of the liberal/conservative spectrum tells how the Yanks, who won WW II with a little help from the Russians and other allies, and who then thoroughly dominated the world both economically and

militarily, *could* have behaved like vengeful conquerors, but instead devoted their resources and energies to spreading democracy, freedom, and the blessings of capitalism around the world. Gag me with a Tomahawk cruise missile! What is weird about this narrative is that it “disappears” not only the millions of victims of America’s wars but the very military forces that nationalists like Trump claim deserve to be worshipfully honored. Eight hundred bases? A million and a half troops on active duty? Total air and sea domination? I’m shocked . . . shocked!

In fact, there are two sorts of blindness operative in the current U.S. political environment. The Democratic Party Establishment, now swollen to include a wide variety of Russia-haters, globalizing capitalists, and militarists, is blind (or pretends to be) to the connection between the “Western Alliance” and the American Empire. The Trump Party (which I expect, one of these days, to shed the outworn Republican label in favor of something more Berlusconi-like, say, the American Greatness Party) is blind – or pretends to be – to the contradiction between its professed “Fortress America” nationalism and the reality of a global U.S. *imperium*.

This last point is worth emphasizing. In a recent article in *The Nation*, Michael Klare, a writer I generally admire, claims to have discovered that there is really a method to Trump’s foreign policy madness, i.e., the President favors the sort of “multi-polar” world, with Russia and China occupying the two other poles, that Putin and Xi Jinping have long advocated. Two factors make this article odd as well as interesting. First, the author argues that multi-polarity is a bad idea, because “smaller, weaker states, and minority peoples everywhere will be given even shorter shrift than at present when caught in any competitive jousting for influence among the three main competitors (and their proxies).” Wha? Even shorter shrift than under unipolarity? I think not, especially considering that adding new poles (why just three, BTW? What about India and Brazil?) gives smaller states and minority peoples many more bargaining options in the power game.

More important, however, Trump’s multi-polar/nationalist ideals are clearly contradicted by his determination to make American world domination even more overwhelming by vastly increasing the size of the U.S. military establishment. Klare notes, correctly, that the President has denounced the Iraq War, criticized American “overextension” abroad, talked about ending the Afghan War, and declared that the U.S. should not be “the world’s policeman.” But if he wants America to become a mere Great Power in a world of Great Powers, Trump will clearly have to do more than talk about it. He will have to cut the

military budget, abandon military bases, negotiate arms control agreements, convert military-industrial spending to peaceful uses, and do all sorts of other things he clearly has no intention of doing. Ever.

No – if the Western Alliance, democratic values, and WTO trade rules provide ideological cover and junior partners for American global hegemony, “go-it-alone” nationalism, multi-polarity, and Nobel Peace Prize diplomatic efforts provide ideological cover for . . . American global hegemony! This can be seen most clearly in the case of Iran, against whom Trump has virtually declared war. He would like to avoid direct military involvement there, of course, but he is banking on threats of irresistible “fire and fury” to bring the Iranians to heel. And if these threats are unavailing? Then – count on it! – the Empire will act like an empire, and we will have open war.

In fact, Trump and his most vociferous critics and supporters are unknowingly playing the same game. John Brennan, meet Steve Bannon! You preach very different sermons, but you’re working for the same god. That deity’s name changes over the centuries, but we worship him every time we venerate symbols of military might at sports events, pay taxes to support U.S. military supremacy, or pledge allegiance to a flag. The name unutterable by both Trump and his enemies is Empire.

What do we do with the knowledge that both the Tweeter King and the treason-baiting coalition opposing him are imperialists under the skin? Two positions, I think, have to be rejected. One is the Lyndon Johnson rationale: since Johnson was progressive on domestic issues, including civil rights and poverty, that made him preferable to the Republicans, even though he gave us the quasi-genocidal war in Indochina. The other position is the diametric opposite: since Trump is less blatantly imperialistic than most Democratic Party leaders, we ought to favor him, despite his billionaire-loving, immigrant-hating, racist and misogynist domestic policies. Merely to say this is to refute it.

My own view is that anti-imperialists ought to decline to choose between these alternatives. We ought to *name* the imperial god that both Trump and his critics worship and demand that the party that we work and vote for renounce the pursuit of U.S. global hegemony. Immediately, this means letting self-proclaimed progressives or libertarians in both major parties know that avoiding new hot and cold wars, eliminating nuclear weapons and other WMD, slashing military spending, and converting war production to peaceful uses are top priorities that must be honored if they are to get our support. No political party can deliver peace and social justice and maintain the Empire at the same

time. If neither Republicans nor Democrats are capable of facing this reality, we will have to create a new party that can.

Notes.

[1] The author is University Professor of Conflict Resolution and Public Affairs at George Mason University. His most recent book is *Resolving Structural Conflicts: How Violent Systems Can Be Transformed* (2017).