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## Are We Witnessing the Emergence of a New World Order?

**An imperial era is on the wane, war is in absentia and there are no rising great powers on the horizon.**

Tom Engelhardt

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There is, it seems, something new under the sun.

Geopolitically speaking, when it comes to war and the imperial principle, we may be in uncharted territory. Take a look around and you'll see a world at the boiling point. From Ukraine to Syria, South Sudan to Thailand, Libya to Bosnia, Turkey to Venezuela, citizen protest (left and right) is sparking not just disorganization, but what looks like, to coin a word, de-organization at a global level. Increasingly, the unitary status of states, large and small, old and new, is being called into question. Civil war, violence and internecine struggles of various sorts are visibly on the rise. In many cases, outside countries are involved and yet in each instance state power seems to be draining away to no other state's gain. So here's one question: Where exactly is power located on this planet of ours right now?

There is, of course, a single waning superpower that has in this new century sent its military into action globally, aggressively, repeatedly—and disastrously. And yet these actions have failed to

reinforce the imperial system of organizing and garrisoning the planet that it put in place at the end of World War II; nor has it proven capable of organizing a new global system for a new century. In fact, everywhere it's touched militarily, local and regional chaos have followed.

In the meantime, its own political system has grown gargantuan and unwieldy; its electoral process has been overwhelmed by vast flows of money from the wealthy 1 percent; and its governing system is visibly troubled, if not dysfunctional. Its rich are ever richer, its poor ever poorer, and its middle class in decline. Its military, the largest by many multiples on the planet, is nonetheless beginning to cut back. Around the world, allies, client states and enemies are paying ever less attention to its wishes and desires, often without serious penalty. It has the classic look of a great power in decline and in another moment it might be easy enough to predict that, though far wealthier than its Cold War superpower adversary, it has simply been heading for the graveyard more slowly but no less surely.

Such a prediction would, however, be unwise. Never since the modern era began has a waning power so lacked serious competition or been essentially without enemies. Whether in decline or not, the United States—these days being hailed as “the new Saudi Arabia” in terms of its frackable energy wealth—is visibly in no danger of losing its status as the planet's only imperial power.

What, then, of power itself? Are we still in some strange way—to bring back the long forgotten Bush-era phrase—in a unipolar moment? Or is power, as it was briefly fashionable to say, increasingly multipolar? Or is it helter-skelter-polar? Or on a planet whose temperatures are rising, droughts growing more severe, and future food prices threatening to soar (meaning yet more protest, violence and disruption), are there even “poles” any more?

Here, in any case, is a reality of the initial thirteen years of the twenty-first century: for the first time in at least a half a millennium, the imperial principle seems to be ebbing, and yet the only imperial power, increasingly incapable of organizing the world, isn't going down.

If you survey our planet, the situation is remarkably unsettled and confusing. But at least two things stand out, and whatever you make of them, they could be the real news of the first decades of this century. Both are right before our eyes, yet largely unseen. First, the imperial principle and the great power competition to which it has been wedded are on the wane. Second and no less startling, war (global, intrastate, anti-insurgent), which convulsed the twentieth century, seems to be waning as well. What in the world does it all mean?

## **A Scarcity of Great Powers**

Let's start with the imperial part of the equation. From the moment the Europeans dispatched their cannon-bearing wooden ships on a violent exploration and conquest of the globe, there has never been a moment when one or more empires weren't rising as others waned, or when at least two and sometimes several "great powers" weren't competing for ways to divide the planetary spoils and organize, encroach upon or take over spheres of influence.

In the wake of World War II, with the British Empire essentially penniless and the German, Japanese and Italian versions of empire crushed, only two great powers were left. They more or less divided the planet unequally between them. Of the two, the United States was significantly wealthier and more powerful. In 1991, after a nearly half-century-long Cold War in which those superpowers at least once came to the edge of a nuclear exchange, and blood was spilled in copious amounts on "the peripheries" in "limited war," the last of the conflicts of that era—in Afghanistan—helped take down the Soviet Union. When its army limped home from what its leader referred to as "the bleeding wound" and its economy imploded, the USSR unexpectedly—and surprisingly peacefully—disappeared.

Which, of course, left one. The superest of all powers of any time—or so many in Washington came to believe. There had never, they were convinced, been anything like it. One hyperpower, one planet: that was to be the formula. Talk of a "peace dividend" disappeared quickly enough and, with the US military financially and technologically dominant and no longer worried about a war that might quite literally end all wars, a new era seemed to begin.

There had, of course, been an ongoing "arms race" between great powers since at least the end of the nineteenth century. Now, at a moment when it should logically have been over, the US instead launched an arms race of one to ensure that no other military would ever be capable of challenging its forces. (Who knew then that those same forces would be laid low by ragtag crews of insurgents with small arms, homemade roadside bombs and their own bodies as their weapons?)

As the new century dawned, a crew led by George W. Bush and Dick Cheney ascended to power in Washington. They were the first administration ever largely born of a think tank (with the ambitious name Project for a New American Century). Long before 9/11 gave them their opportunity to set the American military loose on the planet, they were already dreaming of an all-American imperium that would outshine the British or Roman empires.

Of course, who doesn't know what happened next? Though they imagined organizing a Pax Americana in the Middle East and then on a planetary scale, theirs didn't turn out to be an organizational vision at all. They got bogged down in Afghanistan, destabilizing neighboring Pakistan. They got bogged down in Iraq, having punched a hole through the heart of the planet's oil heartlands and set off a Sunni-Shiite regional civil war, whose casualty lists continue to

stagger the imagination. In the process, they never came close to their dream of bringing Tehran to its knees, no less establishing even the most rudimentary version of that Pax Americana.

They were an imperial whirlwind, but every move they made proved disastrous. In effect, they lent a hand to the de-imperialization of the planet. By the time they were done and the Obama years were upon us, Latin America was no longer an American “backyard”; much of the Middle East was a basketcase (but not an American one); Africa, into which Washington continues to move military forces, was beginning to destabilize; Europe, for the first time since the era of French President Charles de Gaulle, seemed ready to say “no” to American wishes (and was angry as hell).

And yet power, seeping out of the American system, seemed to be coagulating nowhere. Russian President Vladimir Putin has played a remarkably clever hand. From his role in brokering a Syrian deal with Washington to the hosting of the Olympics and a winning medal count in Sochi, he’s given his country the look of a great power. In reality, however, it remains a relatively ramshackle state, a vestige of the Soviet era still, as in Ukraine, fighting a rearguard action against history (and the inheritors of the Cold War mantle, the United States and the European Union).

The EU is an economic powerhouse, but in austerity-gripped disarray. While distinctly a great economic force, it is not in any functional sense a great power.

China is certainly the enemy of choice both for Washington and the American public. And it is visibly a rising power, which has been putting ever more money into building a regional military. Still, it isn’t fighting and its economic and environmental problems are staggering enough, along with its food and energy needs, that any future imperial destiny seems elusive at best. Its leadership, while more bullish in the Pacific, is clearly in no mood to take on imperial tasks. (Japan is similarly an economic power with a chip on its shoulder, putting money into creating a more expansive military, but an actual imperial repeat performance seems beyond unlikely.)

There was a time when it was believed that as a group the so-called BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (and some added Turkey)—would be the collective powerhouse of a future multi-polar planet. But that was before the Brazilian, South African, Indian and Turkish economies stopped looking so rosy.

In the end, the United States aside, great powers remain scarcer than hen’s teeth.

## **War: Missing in Action**

Now, let's move on to an even more striking and largely unremarked upon characteristic of these years. If you take one country—or possibly two—out of the mix, war between states or between major powers and insurgencies has largely ceased to exist.

Admittedly, every rule has its exceptions and from full-scale colonial-style wars (Iraq, Afghanistan) to small-scale conflicts mainly involving drones or air power (Yemen, Somalia, Libya), the United States has seemingly made traditional war its own in the early years of this century. Nonetheless, the Iraq war ended ignominiously in 2011 and the Afghan War seems to be limping to something close to an end in a slow-motion withdrawal this year. In addition, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel has just announced the Pentagon's intention to cut its boots-on-the-ground contingent significantly in the years to come, a sign that future conflicts are far less likely to involve full-scale invasions and occupations on the Eurasian land mass.

Possible exception number two: Israel launched a thirty-four day war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 and a significant three-week military incursion into the Gaza Strip in 2008–09 (though none of this added up to anything like the wars that country fought in the previous century).

Otherwise when it comes to war—that is, to sending armies across national boundaries or, in nineteenth-century style, to distant lands to conquer and “pacify”—we're left with almost nothing. It's true that the last war of the previous century between Ethiopia and neighboring Eritrea straggled six months into this one. There was as well the 2008 Russian incursion into Georgia (a straggler from the unraveling of the Soviet Union). Dubbed the “five-day war,” it proved a minor affair (if you didn't happen to be Georgian).

There was also a dismal US-supported Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 (and a Kenyan invasion of that mess of a country but not exactly state in 2011). As for more traditional imperial-style wars, you can count them on one hand, possibly one finger: the 2013 French intervention in Mali (after a disastrous US/NATO air-powered intervention in Libya destabilized that neighboring country). France has also sent its troops elsewhere in Africa, most recently into the Central African Republic, but these were at best micro-versions of nineteenth-century colonial wars. Turkey has from time to time struck across its border into Iraq as part of an internal conflict with its Kurdish population.

In Asia, other than rising tensions and a couple of ships almost bumping on the high seas, the closest you can get to war in this century was a minor border clash in April 2001 between India and Bangladesh.

Now, the above might look like a sizeable enough list until you consider the record for the second half of the twentieth century in Asia alone: the Korean War (1950–53), a month-long border war between China and India in 1962, the French and American wars in Vietnam (1946–

75), the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978; China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979; and Indian-Pakistani wars in 1965, 1971 and 1999. (The Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971 was essentially a civil war.) And that, of course, leaves out the carnage of the first fifty years of a century that began with a foreign intervention in the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 and ended with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In fact, judged by almost any standard from just about any period in the previous two centuries, war is now missing in action, which is indeed something new under the sun.

### **Driving With the Lights Off**

So an imperial era is on the wane, war in absentia, and no rising great power contenders on the horizon. Historically speaking, that's a remarkable scorecard in an otherwise appalling world.

Of course, the lack of old-style war hardly means no violence. In the thirteen years of this new century, the scorecard on internal strife and civil war, often with external involvement, has been awful to behold: Yemen (with the involvement of the Saudis and the Americans), Syria (with the involvement of the Russians, the Saudis, the Qataris, the Iranians, Hezbollah, the Iraqis, the Turks and the Americans), and so on. The record, including the Congo (numerous outside parties), South Sudan, Darfur, India (a Maoist insurgency), Nigeria (Islamic extremists) and so on, couldn't be grimmer.

Moreover, thirteen years at the beginning of a century is a rather small sampling. Just think of 1914 and the great war that followed. Before the present Ukrainian crisis is over, for instance, Russian troops could again cross a border in force (as in 2008) along the still fraying edges of the former Soviet Union. It's also possible (though developments seem to be leading in quite a different direction) that either the Israelis or the Americans could still launch an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, increasing the chaos and violence in the Middle East. Similarly, an incident in the edgy Pacific might trigger an unexpected conflict between Japan and China. (Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently compared this moment in Asia to the eve of World War I in Europe and his country and China to England and Germany.) And of course there are the "resource wars" expected on an increasingly devastated planet.

Still, for the moment no rising empire and no states fighting each other. So who knows? Maybe we are off the beaten path of history and in terra incognita. Perhaps this is a road we've never been down before, an actual new world order. If so, we're driving it with our headlights off, the wind whipping up, and the rain pouring down on a planet that may itself, in climate terms, be heading for uncharted territory.