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The World After Obama

By Vijay Prashad
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When United States President Barack Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, he said: "Perhaps the most profound issue surrounding my receipt of this prize is the fact that I am the Commander-in-Chief of the military of a nation in the midst of two wars." Obama meant the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, although this is a modest answer. The U.S. had been involved in far more than two wars. In 2001, George W. Bush had committed the U.S. to a Global War on Terror at any time and at any place. U.S. Special Forces and drone aircraft had been involved in combat operations in far more than two countries.

No other country has as expansive a footprint as the U.S. There are 800 U.S. military bases in 80 countries, sentry posts around the planet for U.S. interests. Neither China nor Russia is not anywhere near the U.S. in terms of military reach. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. had no competitor on the global stage. It prosecuted war without worry or challenge. This was evident in Iraq in 1991. Lack of effective constraint on U.S. ambitions forced the leadership of the United Nations to sanctify America's wars. After the fiasco of its Iraq invasion in 2003, the U.S. found its legitimacy eroded. The U.N. was dragooned to hastily pass a new mandate, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine of 2005, which suggested that U.N.-member states could intervene in a domestic conflict if civilians were being harmed.

Hillary Clinton's Wars

Whatever Obama's personal views on war, he was not surrounded by peaceniks. He had said that the Iraq invasion of 2003 had been the "bad war". The U.S. attack on Afghanistan was, in contrast, the "good war". Other "good wars" could be prosecuted, especially if they came with the imprimatur of R2P. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) war on Libya, for instance, was an R2P attack. Obama had been reticent. His Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, worked hard to convince him to bomb Libya. As Hillary Clinton's adviser Anne-Marie Slaughter wrote in an email from March 19, 2011: "I have never been prouder of having worked for turning [the President] around on this." Hillary Clinton responded three days later: "Keep your fingers crossed and pray for a soft landing for everyone's sake." Libya, which was Hillary Clinton's war as much as that of France's Nicolas Sarkozy, started as the "good war", but turned "bad" soon afterwards.

Hillary Clinton is the presumptive Democratic candidate to succeed Obama. One of her arguments for her candidacy is that she exceeds the other party candidates in terms of foreign policy experience. But what does her experience amount to? The most important part of her resume is that she spent four years as Secretary of State in Obama's first presidency. Key moments in her career show how she undermined the democratic interests of other countries on behalf of the planetary interests of the U.S. In 2009, Hillary Clinton's department played an active role in the coup against Manuel Zelaya, the democratically elected President of Honduras. Unhappiness in Latin America did not deter Hillary Clinton, who wanted to hasten new elections under the coup administration to "render the question of Zelaya moot", as she put it in her autobiography. The coup sent a message throughout Latin America: the U.S. had not forgotten that it would act on behalf of business interests and the military against any challenge to the status quo.

Soft coup

The next year, she played a key role in the resignation of Yukio Hatoyama, the democratically elected Prime Minister of Japan. Hatoyama had won a mandate to remove the U.S. military base at Okinawa. She travelled to Japan as Hatoyama tried to fulfil his pledge. She lobbied against the removal of the base, stoking up discontent among the political class. One of Hatoyama's allies broke away. He resigned a few weeks after Hillary Clinton left Japan. It was a soft coup. The war on Libya in 2010 was Hillary Clinton's most powerful experience. When the Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi was killed on the outskirts of Sirte, she said: "We came, we saw, he died." It was a callous display of U.S. power. It is a window to how Hillary Clinton would govern as President: with an iron fist against any challenge to U.S. power.

Hillary Clinton is the measure of the U.S. establishment's view of its authority and its need to drive an agenda in the world. The Republican who is closest to her is Marco Rubio, the young Cuban-American Senator from Florida. Both Rubio and Hillary Clinton believe that the U.S. is an exceptional country and that without U.S. leadership the world will sink into a morass. She delights in calling the U.S. "an indispensable nation" and suggests that there are few problems in the world "that can be solved without the U.S.". "There is only one nation on earth," Rubio said in 2014, "capable of rallying and bringing together the free people on this planet to stand up to

the spread of totalitarianism." Only the U.S. can do things. Others are themselves dangerous. China and Russia, for Rubio and Hillary Clinton, are living threats. "A gangster in Moscow is not just threatening Europe," Rubio said colourfully last year, but "he's threatening to destroy and divide NATO." Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State, had compared Vladimir Putin to Adolph Hitler. The establishment is pledged to push back against Russia. There is wide consensus on that. (See Diana Johnstone's *Queen of Chaos*.)

If Russia can be easily portrayed as an ominous threat, the U.S. establishment is far more cautious about China. Both Hillary Clinton and Rubio admire former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who argues, in his book *China*, for collaboration between the two powers. Confrontation is not worth it given the interpenetration of the U.S. and Chinese economies. On Cuba and Vietnam, Rubio said that engagement had not brought freedom to these countries. When asked about China, he said: "From a geopolitical perspective, our approach to China by necessity has to be different from Cuba." It is the words by necessity that indicate the Kissinger caution. Last year, Hillary Clinton ruffled feathers in Beijing when she questioned the leadership's commitment to women's rights. But this does not define her relations with China, which are far more pragmatic—in line with that of U.S. business interests. Clashing swords is bad for those interests who want a better deal rather than drama on the high seas.

Republican isolationism

If Rubio and Hillary Clinton mirror the establishment on war and trade, the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump comes at foreign policy from an idiosyncratic place. On the surface, Trump looks like an isolationist, someone who wants the U.S. to withdraw from entanglements around the world. He wants to build a giant wall around the country and use aerial power to discipline people around the world. Ted Cruz, a religious zealot, has made genocidal comments about this use of aerial power. He said he wants to bomb the Islamic State (I.S.) into oblivion to know "if sand can glow in the dark". Trump said that his troops would dip bullets in pig's blood to execute Muslims. It is vicious rhetoric. But at the same time Trump attacked George W. Bush's 2003 Iraq War, calling it "a big, fat mistake, alright?"

Trump and Cruz are incoherent in their isolationism. They would not like to entangle the U.S. in wars and yet are eager to bomb their adversaries. Their isolationism is also anachronistic. The U.S.' military is not only spread across the world, but its government sees itself as the world's policeman. This policeman role is rooted in the maintenance of a set of trade and financial relations across the world. In other words, the U.S. military presence sets the terms for U.S. economic power, driven through the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund (where the U.S. was happy to back a second term for Christine Lagarde). A genuine isolationism would have to break with a foreign policy that protects the overseas interests of the U.S.-based transnational corporations and billionaires. But Republican isolationists would like the benefits of military power without its exercise. This is the heart of their confusion.

Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders shares Trump's views on the Iraq War but comes at the roots of power from a different perspective. Sanders said the U.S. "cannot and should not be policeman of the world". This is a break with the consensus. When it comes to the power of Wall Street within the country, Sanders is clear as crystal. He is not publicly as clear, however, with

the links between the trade and financial advantages gained by the U.S. from its military footprint around the planet. The only way to truly withdraw U.S. power would be to also recognise that this means that the U.S. will no longer have unbridled financial and commercial advantages across the planet. There is something of the prophetic voice in Sanders, fulminating against Wall Street and the billionaires. But when it comes to the world, he fumbles. It is not, as Hillary Clinton suggests, a lack of experience on his part. The rest of the candidates to succeed Obama are united on the view that the U.S.' power must be untouched. Sanders seems to suggest that the era of U.S. power must come to an end. But he just cannot get himself to say so.