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USA

# On Imperial Conundrums

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**THE SWIRLING CRAZINESS and bizarre entertainments of the 2016 presidential election sometimes obscure how much the outgoing U.S. administration “ and the next one taking office in January 2017 “ face a set of global crises on a scale that’s hard to recall in recent history.**

There’s not a central “superpower conflict” as during the Cold War, but rather partially interlocking developments in a world of general turmoil. Some of these conundrums, particularly in the Middle East, result partly from ruinous imperial policies, creating problems for which the global masters have no solutions. At least one, an environmental crisis of staggering proportions, is deeply embedded in the dynamics of capital accumulation, accelerated by the drive for unlimited corporate power in the global economy.

This issue of *Against the Current* goes to press weeks prior to the November 8 election, but will reach our readers just before or immediately after the results are known. As these lines are written in the immediate wake of the obscene Trump video and leaked Clinton emails, we don’t know whether the new leader of the U.S. empire will be the centrist militarist Hillary Clinton, or the economic nationalist, anti-immigrant racist Donald Trump. Most of U.S. and global capital are united in an almost unprecedented way in support of Clinton, while Vladimir Putin’s Russian regime and almost certainly the leadership of ISIS are devoutly hoping for a Trump upset victory, but none of this guarantees the outcome of this strangest of electoral seasons.

A discussion of the present global chaos must really begin with Syria, where the Assad regime and its Russian godfather has turned the country into a land of a hundred Guernicas, of slaughter and destruction of civilian life on an unimaginable scale. Every accusation leveled against the Damascus regime and Moscow “ the deliberate terror bombing of hospitals and markets and aid convoys, chemical attacks, starvation as both a weapon and consequence of war “ is essentially accurate. The heroism of Syrian “white helmet” rescuers and international aid workers is matched by the cynical violations of the Kerry-Lavrov “cease-fire agreement” that didn’t even survive its initial seven days.

But almost the same level of destruction is being perpetrated on Yemen, by Saudi Arabia with U.S. backing “ mostly away from the international press and without even the coverage afforded by useless diplomatic bleating at the United Nations Security Council.

To get a handle on the multiple wars in Syria, we urge our readers to listen to an expert September 14 presentation by [Phyllis Bennis](#). As Bennis lays out in much more detail than is possible here, what began as a “heroic” popular democratic movement in the context of Arab Spring has been overwhelmed by militarization and external intervention “ in which the United States is heavily involved, but not the only or dominant power “ as well as deepening confrontation between the Kurdish national struggle and the Turkish regime, the regional Sunni-Shia conflict, the rise of ISIS and al-Qaeda forces in Syria and Iraq with backing from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf oil kingdoms, and more.

Bennis explained that the only way forward now requires an urgent end of the fighting, and that the U.S. peace movement needs to demand ending our own government’s military intervention. However, we find it hard to see either a military or any political “solution” to the overwhelming Syrian tragedy anywhere on the horizon. Meanwhile, of course, the massive flight of desperate refugees “ the American response to which is so shamefully small “ is not only destabilizing the neighboring Arab states of Lebanon and Jordan, but shaking the foundations of an already weakening European Union.

Two aspects of the Obama administration's current position in Iraq and Syria are certain to continue under Hillary Clinton, and most likely under Donald Trump as far as the latter's hypothetical behavior in the White House can be foretold. The first is the involvement of U.S. special forces "boots on the ground" under a different guise and bombing on a heavier scale than officially acknowledged. The presumably accidental U.S. "coalition" bombing of a Syrian army position (Britain and Australia have also admitted involvement), which provided a pretext for Assad and Russia to blow up the fragile cease-fire, is one window into the hidden extent of American-led intervention.

The second is a partial policy paralysis of the Obama administration, which has continually repeated the "Assad-must-go" mantra while not equipping rebel forces with the means (anti-aircraft capacity in particular) to defend themselves and the population against the regime's savagery. There's been a logical basis for this hesitation, including real fear of weapons falling into the hands of extreme Islamists who are well-armed anyway, however, thanks to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as well as the U.S. desire from the beginning, to replace Assad without bringing down the Syrian state apparatus.

Washington's two critical allies have separate strategic priorities. Saudi Arabia's rulers, seeking to curb Iran's regional strength, have encouraged and enabled jihadist forces, while the Turkish regime wants above all to crush the Kurdish autonomy movement which has been the most effective anti-ISIS fighting force on the ground.

A huge underlying factor, of course, is the severe weakening of U.S. power to control the region following the Bush-Cheney gang's adventures, which could be summarized with the phrase "It takes a village idiot to blow up the Middle East." But the consequences have reverberated long past the life of the George W. Bush administration. The United States has been entangled in the Afghanistan war for 15 years after the 9-11 attacks, and the choice of the Obama administration to keep U.S. forces there pretty much guarantees that they'll be on the ground for 15 more.

Nor is there any likely early disentanglement from Iraq, where the impending battle for Mosul against ISIS will be followed by long and messy inter-sectarian conflicts. As the brilliant British journalist Robert Fisk observed a decade ago: "The United States must get out of Iraq. The United States will get out of Iraq. And the United States can't get out of Iraq."

For the international left in this desperate situation, unable to influence the military course of events, our demands must be for ending the bombing in Syria and Yemen, immediate and massive humanitarian aid to save the population, and the right of refugees to settle in the rich countries of Europe and North America although none of this is an adequate response to an overwhelming disaster.

## Moscow, Washington and Europe

The United States remains a massive power, but not a controlling one. While the destruction of the Iraqi state under the U.S. invasion greatly empowered Iran, the devastation in Syria opened the door for Russian intervention to save Assad and to open a second front and bargaining chip for Russia along with its frozen half-annexation in eastern Ukraine.

It would be mistaken to view Vladimir Putin's Russia as a "rising power." The crisis of the central state budget is taking a terrible toll on less affluent regions of the Russian Federation, made all the worse by the effects of European economic sanctions and collapsed oil prices. Moscow does have, however, a revamped and modernized military, the ability to respond to NATO's aggressive expansion toward Russia's borders in Eastern and Central Europe, Russia's importance as Europe's natural gas supplier, the potential to exploit the United States' problematic relations with Turkey and China, and growing uncertainty over the political and economic viability of the European Union.

It's not that there's a dominant or rising power in the Atlantic and European arena — not the United States, not Russia, not post-Brexit Britain, not Germany and certainly not the EU. Greece continues to be waterboarded under the brutal austerity imposed by German policies. Germany's own export-dependent economy is visibly slowing down with the shrinkage of its Chinese and southern European markets, and its largest financial institution Deutschebank is facing severe problems.

In Italy, the economic malaise is taking the form of a growing banking crisis that could rapidly spread to German and other financial centers. In Spain there's a political impasse, against the backdrop of terrible wave of housing foreclosures and the revival of the Catalan independence movement. In many countries, political conflicts are sharpening over the admission and absorption of refugees from Syria as well as Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea and Libya.

Developments in Latin America would appear to pose opportunities for reviving U.S. hemispheric hegemony. The parliamentary coup in Brazil, the electoral victory of the right wing in Argentina, and the end of the guerilla insurgency in Colombia all look like restoring the "stability" to which U.S. capital in Latin America was so long accustomed.

Thanks to the return of Honduras to the rule of death squads and drug gangs following the 2009 coup that was welcomed and supported by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, refugee children and women from that country have piled up in border detention centers to the everlasting disgrace of Clinton, Obama and the United States.

On a larger scale, the catastrophic meltdown in Venezuela — the causes of which are discussed by Jeffery Webber in his interview in this issue — is not only a disaster for the hopes that were inspired by the "Bolivarian Revolution." On its face, this is another gain for U.S. domination. But the potential for either a social explosion in Venezuela, or the ascendance of an extreme rightist regime, might prove destabilizing for the region and bring about yet another wave of fleeing refugees.

## Nature vs. the Empire

Very few of these seething issues find their way into the U.S. electoral debate, aside from Trumpian ravings about banning Muslim immigration, invading Iraq's oil fields (the craziest idea of all), and tearing up the nuclear deal with Iran. That prospect, however unlikely, must leave Vladimir Putin salivating over the prospect of driving Iran into a strategic alliance with Russia. But despite the lack of serious discussion, these are emergent explosive problems.

In our previous editorial ([ATC 184](#)) we covered the potential effort by the Obama administration and congressional leaders to ram the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) through the post-election lame-duck session. We won't repeat that discussion here except to reiterate its connection to rising tensions over China's military-political outreach and the United States' strategic effort to counter it.

The broader issues posed by the emerging power of China must be left to a separate discussion that's beyond the space limitations of this brief overview. China is both a major force in the new power relations in global capital, and at the same time subject to the pressures and strains of a fragile world economy on which its own export-dependent model heavily depends.

It's impossible to grasp the global picture, however, without confronting the reality of capital's forced march toward environmental disaster. The year 2016 will be the hottest in the historical record; eastern and southern Africa from Ethiopia to Zimbabwe and South Africa are suffering a massive drought and the threat of famine; southern Louisiana

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was deluged by floods beyond anything in living memory; fish stocks are collapsing and coral reefs are bleaching and the most remote parts of the ocean are choking with microscopic plastic particles.

These and other horrors are at least partial causes of some of the crises we've surveyed here, including years of severe drought that contributed to the Syrian uprising.

It's as if nature itself is in revolt against capitalist production and the empire, and poses the question of which side we want to be on. There is no sign that either U.S. capitalist party or their presidential candidates have a clue about the scale of the crisis or inclination to do anything remotely close to what's required.

But for thousands of activists who get it, solidarity with the Lakota Sioux fight to stop the Dakota Access pipeline is not only an ethical imperative — to stand with people protecting what remains of the homeland stolen from them — it's a struggle for sanity and the survival of humanity. If we don't overcome capitalism, we'll all wind up as refugees with nowhere to go.

*November-December 2016, [ATC 185](#).*