

Oil, Agriculture and Imperialism: Averting the Fast-Track to Armageddon?

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Oil and Energy](#)

US National Security Advisor John Bolton has more or less admitted that the ongoing destabilisation of Venezuela is about grabbing its oil. He [recently stated](#):

"We're looking at the oil assets... We're in conversation with major American companies now... It will make a big difference to the United States economically if we could have American oil companies really invest in and produce the oil capabilities in Venezuela."

The US's hand-picked supposed leader-in-waiting, Juan Guaido, aims to [facilitate the process](#) and usher in a programme of [‘mass privatisation’ and ‘hyper-capitalism’](#) at the behest of his coup-instigating masters in Washington, thereby destroying the socialist revolution spearheaded by the late Hugo Chavez and returning to a capitalist oligarch-controlled economic system.

One might wonder who is Bolton, or anyone in the US, to dictate and engineer what the future of another sovereign state should be. But this is what the US has been doing across the globe for decades. Its bloody imperialism, destabilisations, coups, assassinations, invasions and military interventions have been extensively documented by [William Blum](#).

Of course, although oil is key to the current analysis of events in Venezuela, there is also the [geopolitical subtext](#) of debt, loans and Russian investment and leverage within the country. At the same time, it must be understood that US-led capitalism is experiencing a [crisis of over-production](#): when this occurs capital needs to expand into or create new markets and this entails making countries like Venezuela bow to US hegemony and open up its economy.

For US capitalism, however, oil is certainly king. Its prosperity is maintained by oil with the dollar serving as the world reserve currency. Demand for the greenback is guaranteed as most international trade (especially and significantly oil) is carried out using the dollar. And those who move off it are usually targeted by the US (Venezuela being a [case in point](#)).

US global hegemony depends on Washington maintaining the dollar's leading role. Engaging in [petrodollar recycling](#) and treasury-bond [‘super-imperialism’](#) are joined at the hip and have enabled the US to run up a huge balance of payments deficit (a free ride courtesy of the rest of the world) by using the (oil-backed) paper dollar as security in itself.

More generally, with its [control and manipulation](#) of the World Bank, IMF and WTO, the US has been able to lever international trade and financial systems to its advantage by various means (for example, see [this analysis](#) of Saudi Arabia's oil money in relation to African

debt). US capitalism will not allow its global dominance and the role of the dollar to be challenged.

Unfortunately for humanity and all life on the planet, the US deems it necessary to attempt to prolong its (declining) hegemony and the age of oil.

Oil, empire and agriculture

In the article '[And you thought Greece had a problem](#)', Norman Pagett notes that the ascendance of modern industrialised humans, thanks to oil, has been a short flash of light that has briefly lifted us out of the mire of the middle ages. What we call modern civilisation in the age of oil is fragile and it is becoming increasingly difficult and expensive to extract remaining oil reserves. The age of oil is a driver of climate change, that much is clear. But what is equally disturbing is that the modern global food regime is oil-dependent, not least in terms of the unnecessary transportation of commodities and produce across the planet and the increasing reliance on proprietary seeds designed to be used with agrochemicals derived from petroleum or which rely on fossil fuel during their manufacture.

Virtually all of the processes in the modern food system are now dependent upon this finite resource:

“Vast amounts of oil and gas are used as raw materials and energy in the manufacture of fertilisers and pesticides, and as cheap and readily available energy at all stages of food production: from planting, irrigation, feeding and harvesting, through to processing, distribution and packaging. In addition, fossil fuels are essential in the construction and the repair of equipment and infrastructure needed to facilitate this industry, including farm machinery, processing facilities, storage, ships, trucks and roads. The industrial food supply system is one of the biggest consumers of fossil fuels and one of the greatest producers of greenhouse gases.” [Norman J Church](#) (2005)

Pagett notes that the trappings of civilisation have not altered the one rule of existence: if you don't produce food from the earth on a personal basis, your life depends on someone converting sunlight into food on your behalf. Consider that Arabia's gleaming cities in the desert are built on its oil. It sells oil for food. Then there is the UK, which has to import 40 per cent of its food, and much of the rest depends on oil to produce it, which also has to be imported. Pagett notes that while some talk about the end of the oil age, few link this to or describe it as being the end of the food age.

Without oil, we could survive – but not by continuing to pursue the 'growth' model China or India are pursuing, or which the West has pursued. Without sustainable, healthy agriculture, however, we will not survive. Destroy agriculture, or more precisely the resources to produce food sustainably (the climate, access to fresh water and indigenous seeds, traditional know-how, learning and practices passed on down the generations, soil fertility, etc.), which is what we are doing, and we will be in trouble.

The prevailing oil-based global food regime goes [hand in hand](#) with the wrong-headed oil-based model of 'development' we see in places like India. Such development is based on an outmoded 'growth' paradigm:

“Our politicians tell us that we need to keep the global economy growing at more than 3% each year – the minimum necessary for large firms to make aggregate profits. That means every 20 years we need to double the size of the global economy – double the cars, double the fishing, double the mining, double the McFlurries and double the iPads. And then double them again over the next 20 years from their already doubled state.” – [Jason Hickel](#) (2016)

How can we try to avoid potential catastrophic consequences of such an approach, including what appears to be an increasingly likely nuclear conflict between competing imperial powers?

We must move away from militarism and resource-gabbing conflicts by reorganising economies so that nations live within their environmental means. We must maximise human well-being while actively shrinking out consumption levels and our ecological footprint.

Some might at this point be perplexed by the emphasis on agriculture. But what many overlook is that central to this argument is recognising not only the key role that agriculture has played in facilitating US geopolitical aims but also its potential for transforming our values and how we live. We need a major shift away from the current model of industrialised agriculture and food production. Aside from it being a major emitter of greenhouse gases, it has led to [bad food, poor health](#) and [environmental degradation](#) and has been underpinned by a resource-grabbing, food-deficit producing US foreign policy agenda for many decades, assisted by the WTO, World Bank, IMF and ‘aid’ strategies. For instance, see ‘[Sowing the Seeds of Famine in Ethiopia](#)’ by Michel Chossudovsky and ‘[Destroying African Agriculture](#)’ by Walden Bello.

The control of global agriculture has been a tentacle of US capitalism’s geopolitical strategy. The Green Revolution was exported courtesy of [oil-rich interests](#) and poorer nations adopted agricapital’s chemical-dependent model of agriculture that required loans for inputs and related infrastructure development. It entailed trapping nations into a globalised system of debt bondage, rigged trade relations and the hollowing out and capture of national and local economies. In effect, we have seen the transnational corporate commercialisation and [displacement of](#) localised productive systems.

Western agricapital’s markets are opened or propped up by militarism ([Ukraine](#) and [Iraq](#)), ‘structural adjustment’ and strings-attached loans ([Africa](#)) and slanted trade deals ([India](#)). Agricapital drives a globalised agenda to suit its interests and eradicate impediments to profit. And it doesn’t matter how much devastation ensues or how unsustainable its food regime is, ‘crisis management’ and ‘innovation’ fuel the [corporate-controlled treadmill](#) it seeks to impose.

But as Norman J Church argues, the globalisation and corporate control that seriously threaten society and the stability of our environment are only possible because cheap energy is used to replace labour and allows the distance between producer and consumer to be extended.

We need to place greater emphasis on producing food rooted in the principles of localisation, self-reliance, (carbon sequestering) [regenerative agriculture](#) and (political) [agroecology](#) and to acknowledge the need to regard the commons (soil, water, seeds, land, forests, other natural resources, etc) as genuine [democratically controlled common wealth](#). This approach would offer [concrete, practical solutions](#) (mitigating climate

change, job creation in the West and elsewhere, regenerating agriculture and economies in the Global South, etc) to many of the world's problems that move beyond (but which are linked to) agriculture.

This would present a major challenge to the existing global food regime and the prevailing moribund doctrinaire economics that serves the interests of Western oil companies and financial institutions, global agribusiness and the major arms companies. These interlocking, self-serving interests have managed to institute a globalised system of war, poverty and food insecurity.

The deregulation of international capital flows (financial liberalisation) effectively turned the world into a free-for-all for global capital. The further ramping up of US militarism comes at the back end of a deregulating/pro-privatising neoliberal agenda that has sacked public budgets, depressed wages, expanded credit to consumers and to governments (to sustain spending and consumption) and unbridled financial speculation. This relentless militarism has now become a major driver of the US economy.

Millions are dead in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan as the US and its allies play out a continuation of what they regard as a modern-day 'Great Game'. And now, in what it arrogantly considers its own back yard, the US is instigating yet another coup and possible military attack.

We have Western politicians and the media parroting unfounded claims about President Maduro, like they did with Assad, Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi and like they do about 'Russian aggression'. All for what? Resources, pipelines, oil and gas. And these wars and conflicts and the lies to justify them will only get worse as demand across the world for resources grows against a backdrop of depletion.

We require a different low-energy, low-carbon economic system based on a different set of values. As the US ratchets up tensions in Venezuela, we again witness a continuation of the same imperialist mindset that led to two devastating world wars.

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