

The US and Global Wars: Empire or Vampire?

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

Global Research, September 11, 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, Russia and FSU, USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)
In-depth Report: [UKRAINE REPORT](#)

Introduction

To the growing army of critics of US military intervention, who also reject the mendacious claims by American officials and their apologists of 'world leadership', Washington is engaged in 'empire-building'.

But the notion that the US is building an empire, by engaging in wars to exploit and plunder countries' markets, resources and labor, defies the realities of the past two decades. US wars, including invasions, bombings, occupations, sanctions, coups and clandestine operations have not resulted in the expansion of markets, greater control and exploitation of resources or the ability to exploit cheap labor. Instead US wars have destroyed enterprises, reduced access to raw materials, killed, wounded or displaced productive workers around the world, and limited access to lucrative investment sites and markets via sanctions.

In other words, US global military interventions and wars have done the exact opposite of what all previous empires have pursued: Washington has exploited (and depleted) the domestic economy to expand militarily abroad instead of enriching it.

Why and how the US global wars differ from those of previous empires requires us to examine (1) the forces driving overseas expansion; (2) the political conceptions accompanying the conquest, the displacement of incumbent rulers and the seizure of power and; (3) the reorganization of the conquered states and the accompanying economic and social structures to sustain long-term neo-colonial relations.

Empire Building: The Past

Europe built durable, profitable and extensive empires, which enriched the 'mother country', stimulated local industry, reduced unemployment and 'trickled down' wealth in the form of better wages to privileged sectors of the working class. Imperial military expeditions were preceded by the entry of major trade enterprises (British East India Company) and followed by large-scale manufacturing, banking and commercial firms. Military invasions and political takeovers were driven by competition with economic rivals in Europe, and later, by the US and Japan.

The goal of military interventions was to monopolize control over the most lucrative economic resources and markets in the colonized regions. Imperial repression was directed at creating a docile low wage labor force and buttressing subordinate local collaborators or client-rulers who facilitated the flow of profits, debt payments, taxes and export revenues back to the empire.

Imperial wars were the beginning, not the end, of 'empire building'. What followed these wars of conquest was the incorporation of pre-existing elites into subordinate positions in the administration of the empire. The 'sharing of revenues', between the imperial economic enterprises and pre-existing elites, was a crucial part of 'empire building'. The imperial powers sought to 'instrumentalize' existing religious, political, and economic elites' and harness them to the new imperial-centered division of labor. Pre-existing economic activity, including local manufacturers and agricultural producers, which competed with imperial industrial exporters, were destroyed and replaced by malleable local traders and importers (compradors). In summary, the military dimensions of empire building were informed by economic interests in the mother country. The occupation was pre-eminently concerned with preserving local collaborative powers and, above all, restoring and expanding the intensive and extensive exploitation of local resources and labor, as well as the capture and saturation of local markets with goods from the imperial center.

"Empire-building" Today

The results of contemporary US military interventions and invasions stand in stark contrast with those of past imperial powers. The targets of military aggression are selected on the basis of ideological and political criteria. Military action does not follow the lead of 'pioneer' economic entrepreneurs - like the British East India Company. Military action is not accompanied by large-scale, long-term capitalist enterprises. Multi-national construction companies of the empire, which build great military bases are a drain on the imperial treasury.

Contemporary US intervention does not seek to secure and take over the existing military and civilian state apparatus; instead the invaders fragment the conquered state, decimate its cadres, professionals and experts at all levels, thus providing an entry for the most retrograde ethno-religious, regional, tribal and clan leaders to engage in intra-ethnic, sectarian wars against each other, in other words - chaos. Even the Nazis, in their expansion phase, chose to rule through local collaborator elites and maintained established administrative structures at all levels.

With US invasions, entire existing socio-economic structures are undermined, not 'taken over': all productive activity is subject to the military priorities of leaders bent on permanently crippling the conquered state and its advanced economic, administrative, educational, cultural and social sectors. While this is militarily successful in the short-run, the medium and long-term results are non-functioning states, not a sustained inflow of plunder and expanding market for an empire. Instead what we have is a chain of US military bases surrounded by a sea of hostile, largely unemployed populations and warring ethno-religious groups in decimated economies.

The US claims to 'world leadership' is based exclusively on failed-state empire building. Nevertheless, the dynamic for continuing to expand into new regions, to militarily and politically intervene and establish new client entities continues. And, most importantly, this expansionist dynamic further undermines domestic economic interests, which, theoretically and historically, form the basis for empire. We, therefore, have *imperialism without empire*, a *vampire state* preying on the vulnerable and devouring its own in the process.

Empire or Vampire: The Results of US Global Warfare

Empires, throughout history, have violently seized political power and exploited the riches and resources (both material and human) of the targeted regions. Over time, they would consolidate a 'working relation', insuring the ever-increasing flow of wealth into the mother country and the expanding presence of imperial enterprises in the colony. Contemporary US military interventions have had the opposite effect after every recent major military conquest and occupation.

Iraq: Vampires Pillage

Under Saddam Hussein, the Republic of Iraq was a major oil producer and profitable partner for major US oil companies, as well as a lucrative market for US exports. It was a stable, unified secular state. The first Gulf War in the 1990's led to the first phase of its fragmentation with the de facto establishment of a Kurdish mini-state in the north under US protection. The US withdrew its military forces but imposed brutal economic sanctions limiting economic reconstruction from the devastation of the first Gulf War. The second US-led invasion and full-scale occupation in 2003 devastated the economy and dismantled the state dismissing tens of thousands of experienced civil servants, teachers and police. This led to utter social collapse and fomented ethno-religious warfare leading to the killing, wounding or displacement of millions of Iraqis. The result of GW Bush's conquest of Baghdad was a 'failed state'. US oil and energy companies lost billions of dollars in trade and investment and the US economy was pushed into recession.

Afghanistan: Endless Wars, Endless Losses

The US war against Afghanistan began with the arming, financing and political support of Islamist jihadi-fundamentalists in 1979. They succeeded in destroying and dismantling a secular, national government. With the decision to invade Afghanistan in October 2001 the US became an occupier in Southwest Asia. For the next thirteen years, the US-puppet regime of Hamad Karzai and the 'NATO coalition' occupation forces proved incapable of defeating the Taliban guerrilla army. Billions of dollars were spent devastating the economy and impoverishing the vast majority of Afghans. Only the opium trade flourished. The effort to create an army loyal to the puppet regime failed. The forced retreat of US armed forces beginning in 2014 signals the bitter demise of US 'empire building' in Southwest Asia.

Libya: From Lucrative Trading Partner to Failed State

Libya, under President Gadhafi, was evolving into a major US and European trading partner and influential power in Africa. The regime signed large-scale, long-term contracts with major international oil companies which were backed by a stable secular government. The relationship with the US and EU was profitable. The US opted to impose a 'regime change' through massive US-EU missile and bombing strikes and the arming of a motley collection of Islamist terrorists, ex-pat neo-liberals and tribal militias. While these attacks succeeded in killing President Gadhafi and most of his family (including many of his grandchildren) and dismantling the secular Libyan government and administrative infrastructure, the country was ripped apart by tribal war-lord conflicts, political disintegration and the utter destruction of the economy. Oil investors fled. Over one million Libyans and immigrant workers were displaced. The US and EU 'partners-in-regime-change' have even fled their own embassies in Tripoli - while the Libyan 'parliament' operates off-shore from a casino boat. None of this devastation would have been possible under President Gadhafi. The US vampire bled its new prize, Libya, but certainly could not incorporate it into a profitable 'empire'. Not only

were its oil resources denied to the empire, but even oil exports disappeared. Not even an imperial military base has been secured in North Africa!

Syria: Wars on Behalf of Terrorists not Empire

Washington and its EU allies backed an armed uprising in Syria hoping to install a puppet regime and bring Damascus into their “empire”. The mercenary assaults have caused the deaths of nearly 200,000 Syrians, the displacement of over 30% of the population and the seizure of the Syrian oil fields by the Sunni extremist army, ISIS. ISIS has decimated the pro-US mercenary army, recruiting and arming thousands of terrorists from around the world. It invaded neighboring Iraq conquering the northern third of that country. This was the ultimate result of the deliberate US dismantling of the Iraqi state in 2003.

The US strategy, once again, is to arm Islamist extremists to overthrow the secular Bashar Assad regime in Damascus and then to discard them for a more pliable client. The strategy ‘boomeranged’ on Washington. ISIS devastated the ineffective Iraqi armed forces of the Maliki regime in Baghdad and America’s much over-rated Peshmerga proxy ‘fighters’ in Iraqi ‘Kurdistan’. Washington’s mercenary war in Syria didn’t expand the ‘empire’; indeed it undermined existing imperial outposts.

The Ukrainian Power Grab, Russian Sanctions and Empire Building

In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the US and EU incorporated the Baltic, Eastern European and Balkan ex-communist countries into their orbit. This clearly violated major agreements with Russia, by incorporating most of the neo-liberal regimes into NATO and bringing NATO forces to the very border of Russia. During the corrupt regime of Boris Yeltsin, the ‘West’ absolutely looted the Russian economy in co-operation with local gangster – oligarchs, who took up EU or Israeli citizenship to recycle their pillaged wealth. The demise of the vassal Yeltsin regime and the ascent and recovery of Russia under Vladimir Putin led the US and EU to formulate a strategy to deepen and extend its ‘empire’ by seizing power in the Caucasus and the Ukraine. A power and land grab by the puppet regime in Georgia attacking Russian forces in Ossetia in 2008 was decisively beaten back. This was a mere dress rehearsal for the coup in Kiev. In late 2013-early 2014, the US financed a violent rightwing putsch ousting the elected government and imposing a hand-picked pro-NATO client to assume power in Kiev.

The new pro-US regime moved quickly to purge all independent, democratic, federalist, bilingual and anti-NATO voices especially among the bi-lingual citizens concentrated in the South-Eastern Ukraine. The coup and the subsequent purge provoked a major armed uprising in the southeast, which successfully resisted the invading NATO-backed neo-fascist armed forces and private armies of the oligarchs. The failure of the Kiev regime to subdue the resistance fighters of the Donbass region resulted in a multi-pronged US-EU intervention designed to isolate, weaken and undermine the resistance. First and foremost they attempted to pressure Russia to close its borders on the eastern front where hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian civilians eventually fled the bombardment. Secondly, the US and EU applied economic sanctions on Russia to abandon its political support for the southeast region’s democratic and federalist demands. Thirdly, it sought to use the Ukraine conflict as a pretext for a major military build-up on Russia’s borders, expanding NATO missile sites and organizing an elite rapid interventionist military force capable of bolstering a faltering puppet regime or backing a future NATO sponsored putsch against any adversary.

The Kiev regime is economically bankrupt. Its war against its own civilians in the southeast has devastated Ukraine's economy. Hundreds of thousands of skilled professionals, workers and their families have fled to Russia. Kiev's embrace of the EU has resulted in the breakdown of vital gas and oil agreements with Russia, undermining the Ukraine's principle source of energy and heating with winter only months away. Kiev cannot pay its debts and faces default. The rivalries between neo-fascists and neo-liberals in Kiev will further erode the regime. In sum, the US-EU power grab in the Ukraine has not led to the effective 'expansion of empire'; rather it has ushered in the total destruction of an emerging economy and precipitated a sharp reversal of financial, trade and investment relations with Russia and Ukraine. The economic sanctions against Russia exacerbate the EU current economic crisis. The belligerent posture of military confrontation toward Russia will result in an increase in military spending among the EU states and further divert scarce economic resources from job creation and social programs. The loss by significant sectors of the EU of agricultural export markets, as well as the loss of several billion-dollar military-industrial contracts with Russia, certainly weakens, rather than expands, the 'empire' as an economic force

Iran: 100 Billion Dollar Punitive Sanctions Don't Build Empires

The US-EU sanctions on Iran carry a very high political, economic and political price tag. They do not strengthen empire, if we understand 'empire' to mean the expansion of multinational corporations, and increasing access to oil and gas resources to ensure stable, cheap energy for strategic economic sectors within the imperial center.

The economic war on Iran has been at the behest of US allies, including the Gulf Monarchies and especially Israel. These are dubious 'allies' for US 'empire' . . . widely reviled potentates and a racist regime which manage to exact tribute from the imperial center!

In Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, Iran has demonstrated its willingness to co-operate in power sharing agreements with US global interest. However, Iran is a regional power, which will not submit to becoming a vassal state of the US. The sanctions policy has not provoked an uprising among the Iranian masses nor has it led to regime change. Sanctions have not weakened Iran to the extent of making it an easy military target. While sanctions have weakened Iran's economy, they have also worked against any kind of long-range empire building strategy, because Iran has strengthened its economic and diplomatic ties with the US' rivals, Russia and China.

Conclusion

As this brief survey indicates, US-EU wars have not been instruments of empire-building in the conventional or historical sense. At most they have destroyed some adversaries of empire. But these have been pyrrhic victories. Along with the overthrow of a target regime, the systematic break-up of the state has unleashed powerful chaotic forces, which have doomed any possibility of creating stable neo-colonial regimes capable of controlling their societies and securing opportunities for imperialist enrichment via economic exploitation.

At most the US overseas wars have secured military outposts, foreign islands in seas of desperate and hostile populations. Imperial wars have provoked continuous underground resistance movements, ethnic civil wars and violent terrorist organizations which threaten 'blowback' on the imperial center.

The US and EU's easy annexations of the ex-communist countries, usually via the stage-managed ballot-box or 'color revolutions', led to the take-over of great national wealth and skilled labor. However, Euro-American empires bloody campaigns to invade and conquer the Middle East, South Asia, North Africa and the Caucasus have created nightmarish 'failed states' – continuously draining imperial coffers and leading to a state of permanent occupation and warfare.

The bloodless takeover of the Eastern European satellites with their accommodating, corrupt elites has ended. The 21st century reliance on militarist strategies contrasts sharply with the successful multi-pronged colonial expansions of the 19th – 20th century, where economic penetration and large scale economic development accompanied military intervention and political change. Today's imperial wars cause economic decay and misery within the domestic economy, as well as perpetual wars abroad, an unsustainable drain.

The current US/EU military expansion into Ukraine, the encirclement of Russia, NATO missiles aimed at the very heart of a major nuclear power and the economic sanctions may lead to a global nuclear war, which may indeed put an end to militarist empire-building... and the rest of humanity.

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Prof. James Petras](#), Global Research, 2014

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Prof. James Petras](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca